



24x36

ART AND LOVE
IN THE AGE OF MECHANICAL REPRODUCTION.

Gardner Rich

[NOTE: This novella, completed in 1986, was revised in 1998. This text is the revision. GR]

Aubade

I.

U, my luv, are like the love
Before my last
Who, 2, was like my father's
Father's father:
A Hallmark of infinite
-ly regressive li or
Approximations of sum long lost
/Ideal Desire/

II.

Why smile when I write /i luv u/
As though the lisible
Were mere reiteration
And there could be no space for "you"
In such narration
As this yr own, own tale of "u"

III.

This is for u, yet who m I
Who questions who are /you/?
The trace of present Desire
Is /luv/, nothing more(over)
U were I m u, you, /you/
When u said fuck /yr-self/
[I.e., /we-self/ (two hearts that beat
As one)] last night, so green-'n-blue

IV.

Just love with me and be my trace
And we all plassir will efface
And subject/object, too, erase
As /i/ explain 2 u this space:
It is only u -- yes "you"
With me, yr-ning illisibly.
So wont "you," sincerely,
Accept this cogent card?

1.

"Really?" He ran a java-nervous hand through an amber buzzcut.

"Yes really." She hesitated. "I'm a writer." Two divergent lines of smoke rose from her longish cigarette. "This... Poe-M? Mine."

"What else have you written?" He sat up straight.

"Well," she said, rolling the cigarette against the inside of an ashtray, like a finger in search of a g-spot, "I write under a pen name."

He looked away, then hunched forward over a tall glass of cold coffee, topped with whipped cream. "So what's your pen name?"

He scrutinized the ebony-haired woman sitting across the small round table: the eyebrows floating above porthole-black glasses on a ruled nose over a pouting mouth in a paper-white face. But it was her penciled brow, a high brow reminiscent of distant gulls in a New Yorker cartoon, which he attended. Otherwise, he would have met his own gaze in the reflection of her dark lenses.

Another man sitting at another table could not help overhearing, and he thought:

-- silkscreening she needs it an arrangement as whistler understood it... black hair with reddish streaks red lips black pullover red leotards black socks red boots... a layered concoction... a pousse l'amour...

"Come on, tell me the pen name." The buzzcut's intonation would have coaxed a pinscher to jump a stick.

"If I told you" said the pousse l'amour, rising from her chair, "it would defeat the purpose of a pen name. Now wouldn't it?"

"Where you goin'?" insisted the buzzcut.

"Kitchen. Break's over." She ground out her cigarette and turned toward the doorway, leaving the buzzcut to put a finger through the ring in his left earlobe, which he tugged.

The man at the opposite table thought:

-- ah the museum... glass tables and private chats... glorious morning...

He absently wondered if the buzzcut also had rings through his foreskin. Then, just over there; sitting before the window. What magic backlighting does for a blouse.

-- should find a model... university student... maybe... why not someone who speaks in complete sentences... major in literature even...

He imagined the blouse draped over the drab divan in his studio and its wearer reclining in late-afternoon light, with a book. Nude, of course. With a bit of patterned cloth somewhere. *Summer Reader*, he could call it. But this tableau was immediately displaced by his recollection of the belly-up leviathan recently exhibited by Lucien Freud. And there was Hughes's review in *Time*. What was it? "*The Fat Lady Sings*." He thought:

-- who knows... maybe figure painting is over... unless it can be pushed past freud's... fat with tattoos and pimples... or bruises... or needle tracks... right out of arbus... smart guy hughes... the fat lady sings so what's the point of another nude anytime for the rest of this millenium and well into the next... so far as that goes what's the use of bonding butts to boards with bondo and bric-a-brac and signing one's name as a backward anagram... or... wrapping the whitney... or... levelling the lip of a crater... or... sculpting with light... or... crucifying oneself to a volkswagen careening down the san diego freeway...

"Everything all right?" asked the waiter.

Absently he responded: "Yeah, I think Burden got grant money after that..."

"I'm sorry, Sir?"

"Oh, I see. Excuse me. Yes... I should have enough for this." He nodded affirmatively, paid the check, walked over to the elevator and stepped inside.

He pressed button 3, now luminous. The door sealed hermetically for the ascent to the Third Floor: Contemporary Art. He braced against the handrail. As the elevator jolted upward, he counted Mississippi-one, Mississippi-two, Mississippi.... Third floor. The seal broke as the door opened.

-- there she is... buxom as always... maillol... no one sculpts any more... not like this... duchamp's dada bastards with our trash and glue... we do sculpture... sculpt-r-us... purveyors to the crown of cephalonia and the aliki of abeakuta by mahl stick-in-waiting...

"Good morning," said a guard nodding his blue cap.

"Not too busy today?" he answered the guard.

-- just what i said last time... o frame of fearful symmetry...

"Not this morning. Not after the big night, last night. Always slow after openings. Even the staff are recovering."

"Yeah, probably."

"Oh, then you were here?"

"No, couldn't make it. But I've been other times." He turned back to the bronze.

The guard watched him a moment. "Like I say, I'm here five days a week. Never get tired of that statue, there. But people are funny. You know, when they leave the elevator. They don't see her except from the corner of their eyes. Know what I mean? Especially men coming in with women. You should see them appraising it, you know? Sly, like. And the women? It's not like the models in their magazines. That's for sure."

"Nineteenth century fertility goddess."

"Come again?"

"Another time. Another world. She's a beauty."

"For sure. But she puts people off, somehow. Offends their sensibilities, I guess."

He snorted: "Can't be that delicate."

"Oh sure," said the guard flatly. "A couple days ago, some women from the university were here during a lunch tour. You know; walk-through with a curator. One teaches literature.

The other is an art historian." He shook his head. "You should have heard them downplay it and appreciate it at the same time. I could see it put the curator in a bind."

"How's that?"

"Phal-logo-centri-meta... I don't know. Something seemed to bother them. So there they were, discussing the problems with the piece, when this little kid waltzes up and runs a finger right up the crack of its fanny. Then he takes a whiff, like he's expecting something. Me? I'm trying to maintain some professionalism. You know. But I almost split a gut. You should have seen their faces. The university women. Now staff here -- we see that sort of thing all the time."

Questioningly, the man gestured toward a surveillance camera mounted in the corner.

"That there?" laughed the guard. He shook his head. "A dummy; only for show."

"I'd have bought a ticket."

"Well now, I like it. That statue there. No matter what university folks think. It sends me back to Paris; you know, when the war ended. That was a party. Dancing in fountains. Hugging and kissing. Man! Those French girls. Didn't care who you were for an entire week."

"Good-looking women in Paris?"

"Oh my," said the guard. "Tell you what. I married one. A dancer. Gorgeous. Legs to make Betty Grable blush. Well now, I suppose Therese is getting up there, somewhat. But she can still turn a head..."

-- sixty-five seventy... retiree for sure... must have cut a figure... tall... stately... course the hearing aid is a recent addition...

"And there was another fella," continued the guard. "Something else again. He didn't see me seeing him, you see what I mean. He walks past and kisses her on the nipple. Found out later he was an intern in the conservation department. Guess it was his last day."

The man laughed discretely, nodded to the guard, and cast a final admiring glance toward the Maillol. His thoughts had returned to the reason he had come.

A telephone caller had told him what he might have known had he still read Sunday supplements. The slurred voice of a groggy friend informed him of the current exhibition and that one of his paintings was included. Groggy went on to say how much he liked *Redivivus* and that Gallery Rumpman was lucky to be hanging his work at all. Said the Grog: "What a painting -- one of your best. You should've kept painting that way. I mean, I would've bought it only my tax accountant advised against it." He had listened patiently. Yes, he had responded; thank you, for letting me know.

He questioned the guard: "Which way to the temporary exhibit?"

"You mean the Osborne Wettin-Willis Collection?"

"That's the one: Wet Willie."

The guard smiled and pointed. "Straight down... then left. Can't miss it."

"Thanks."

"You have a pleasant morning."

The man passed through Cubists and Fauvists and Surrealists and dadaists and Fururists: Lhote, Dufy, Tanguy, Picabia, and Severini -- major names, all, but on minor works; and for this reason the museum suffered the disdain of the city's cutting-edgers.

-- so-bart's strutting-hedgers...

He stopped at a line drawing by Picasso, a veritable squiggle triple-matted and framed in gold. The image was no bigger than the label of an aspirin bottle -- because it was a squiggle on the label of an aspirin bottle: a serene French-curve dove carrying in its beak an olive branch. But, importantly, signed and dated. The Magnificent Monster from Malaga had drawn it, most likely, for Paloma -- according to a 14-point label by the Curator of Interpretation, placed to one side unobtrusively under plexiglass. Solemnity lent to a lark. He continued on and turned left into a darkened passage, only to be confronted by spot-lighted signage:

Osborne Wettin-Willis Collection

5 May - 30 August 1987

He crossed the threshold into the gallery and immediately his eyes connected. It was not... resolved, as he had been taught to think. The value structure and color were right enough; but the brushwork bothered him.

He noticed the discrete label placed to the right of the painting and felt suddenly and overwhelmingly disembodied. It read:

Thomas Nygaard (American, 1947-)

Redivivus

Oil on canvas 182 cm x 112 cm.

A glimpse of what the future might hold, only with the dates closed.

That unsettling thought passed, and he turned full attention to the painting. He had not seen it since completing it. Twelve years. Or, at least, he thought he had completed it. But the edge of one forearm was too diffuse, too impressionistic.

"It is like trying to marry lyricism to an epic."

Thought that, had he? Not that anything is wrong with that; just that he had not pulled it off. But why hadn't he seen it then? Yolanda Heine-Watanabe had certainly thought she saw it; then over the coals she raked him. So much per word, probably. Besides wearing out a thesaurus describing his technique, she had attacked indecisiveness, backtracking and backsliding -- in sum, his retro-Platonic Muddled Thinking. How had she phrased it? "One can not be a 19th century bohemian French aristocrat in -- what? -- trickle-down-supply-side-junk-bond Reagan America? No, but something like that -- even for the length of a bourgeois forearm."

--ouch...

That he remembered; and that she had, as they say, spelled his name correctly. But where was she now? He was in Wet Willie, as his now ex-wife pointed out at the time. His friends had said it, at the time. He had thought it, at the time.

--so now what... she had been right and knew it blah blah blah and embarrassing nothing worse than a critic who knows what's what even if on rare occasion but now what...

"I said, it's like trying to marry lyricism to an epic. But perhaps you don't agree?"

The voice was behind his shoulder. Nygaard had been so self-absorbed that he only now became aware of the bantam-like man addressing him. He turned and saw a porkpie hat pulled snugly over flowing white hair, deep-set gray eyes, a sharp nose and thin mouth from the corner of which depended a cigarette holder sans cigarette. He was wearing worn Harris tweed of a cut one finds for six-fifty on the Goodwill racks. The effect was like Frank Lloyd Wright without the cape.

"Well?" the little man insisted. He set down upon the marble floor a wooden case he had been carrying, a paint-encrusted French easel.

"You paint?" asked Nygaard, nodding toward the wooden box.

The old man squinted: "I've covered a canvas or two. Yes."

"Then you must have... years later... seen one... after you thought it was finished... had second thoughts... must have had..." He realized he was thinking aloud.

"Second thoughts?" replied the old man rhetorically. "Third and fourth, I should say. But then, I was never really any good -- except when I was copying. They still do that at the League, you know. The Art Students' League. A life ago; but I still have the habit, as you can see from the easel. In fact, I thought to do a sketch of this one... what's its name?" He looked at the label. "*Redivivus*? Silly title, but the composition is pretty good."

"The museum lets people copy?"

"Sure. What's so surprising about that?" asked the old man. "It may not be the Prado or the Metropolitan, but what the hell? I like to keep my hand in."

Nygaard nodded. With finality, he said: "Then I won't keep you. Enjoy painting."

He looked at nothing else in the collection. He returned to his studio in the SoBart -- well, "District" -- although this rather grand term for an area only three blocks "square" was used mostly by developers from California who were gnawing along the margins south of Barton. It was not a district to the waitresses, runaways and jobless who mostly slept there. Besides, Barton Boulevard was a diagonal, and there was no way to be exactly south of it.

SoBart was a concept. Mostly. Mostly was a key term in SoBart, because it was not so much a district as a wedge of cheese on end, given a cartographic orientation, with Barton Blvd. running SW to true North, and the Ffrench Circle (yes, it was not a circle) running true North to SE, with Danae Street crossing both from East to West. Hence what the locals called it: BFfD. Hence, too, the question and answer "You from SoBart? BFfD."

Then a laugh, mostly, unless the alternates got hot: "Yeah, it's a wedge of cheese, all right? Mostly nobody here thinks of it as an isoceles triangle. So what. BFfD." Of course, this proved that alternates clearly did think of the district as an isoceles triangle, which was the whole point. Outsiders needed to know that the locals had an attitude but were also literate.

Having a studio in SoBart was becoming -- what? In SoBart one looked for an alternative to "cliché" -- a /synonym/ or something.. So it was redundant. It was widely iterated. It was... if words failed, fashionable. And especially desirable was Nygaard's studio over Javier's, the corner Basque bakery. There were tables on the sidewalk, *de rigueur*, and Javier himself was always sitting at the one closest the entry, his head in his hands. Why, because he worried about everything: whether English should be the official language; whether the European Union would ever happen; whether Glastnost would hold; whether another supertanker would spill another billion gallons of crude along the Alaskan coast; whether a programming glitch described in an obscure trade magazine would cause computers to go haywire in another thirteen years, thus shutting down The World As We Know It; whether Pynchon would write another novel; whether the business next door, *The Heavenly Enterprise Gold Shoppe* (whose clientele came to Javier's for *kabushi-noh*) would sell out to Domino's Pizza; whether people would stop eating butter or go completely macrobiotic, thus forcing his bakery into Chapter 11; anything and everything. Nute, Javier's Thai wife, ran the kitchen in the meantime -- and helped on occasion to interpret the menu. She was the one who first understood that *kabushi-noh* meant cappuccino. After all, she had a Masters in Linguistics.

Nygaard liked Javier, especially because he talked with his hands. Also, because he would let the rent slide three months when nothing was moving at Gallery Rumpman. What a ridiculous name; always difficult to admit showing there. Still, its doors stayed open while other galleries, invariably co-ops, folded their tents after a foreordained six months. In fact, just now, there was no other gallery in SoBart -- although rumor had it that some professors from the university were thinking of opening a space. To be staffed by GTAs, was the usual line; or, to be underwritten by taxpayers, was the other. One or the other, it did not matter. If it opened, it would close. They all did. Only bumptiously yclept Gallery Rumpman was eternal as the hills, just visible through the westerly bluish haze.

"Did you see the painting?" asked Javier, looking up from the table cloth. "How was it? You want some cafe latte. On the house, this time. By the way, you had a phone call. I think it was the woman from your gallery."

"Older or younger?"

"Hey, I'm not clairvoyance."

"Clairvoyant."

"Yeah-yeah. You want a latte on the house or not?"

"It's always on the house," said Nygaard smiling. "You know that. Thanks, maybe later."

"So what about the painting?" Javier's expression was serious. "Come on..."

Nygaard shook his head. "It's not what I expected. But what should I expect? It was 1975 and I didn't make a slide of it."

"You don't make slides, remember?" said Javier. "So what difference does that make?"

"No difference. I just forgot how it looked. I remember it being better."

Javier sat back in his chair and looked hard at Nygaard. "You know, you're too damn critical. You know that, don't you? I mean, stop and think: it's in a museum. 99.9% of the dreamers around here haven't a prayer. They're delusional. If their work is ignored, it is because it is misunderstood; and if it is misunderstood, then it is a work of genius done by a genius. Some syllogism."

"Yeah? So why do you hang the local artists on your walls?"

"Never mind that. They'll be telemarketing soon enough. Right now, let 'em dream for a while. What can it hurt? Besides, it's good for business."

"Good for the business? Artists have no money. Not working part-time in your kitchen, anyway."

"I'm just saying that you... that you're *in*. You're in the museum. That's all."

"So that makes me a genius?" countered Nygaard with an exaggerated frown.

"I didn't say that." Javier crossed his arms over his chest. "I don't believe genius exists, okay? Or maybe you think I'm romantic. Maybe you think I don't know the difference between *intellectus originarus* and *intellectus ectypus*. One belongs to God, but the other belongs to the human beings. Read Becker. *Essay On Man*. I'm saying... what? The painting can't be all bad. So what's wrong with you, anyway? You're too critical."

"What's wrong with me? Hanging in a museum has nothing to do with quality. Picasso proves it. He did maybe a dozen good paintings -- and the other 10,000 are just signed. May as well trade them for Dali's prints -- or better, a rubber stamp."

"So you're saying he signed blank canvases? Picasso? What's wrong with you? You want to argue Picasso?"

"No, I don't want to argue Picasso."

"That's 'cause you can't. That's because he's..."

"A shibboleth."

Javier threw up both hands in exasperation. "Hey... Shibboleth already, and it's not even lunch time? Come on, Tom..."

"Come on what?" asked Nygaard.

"Guess I can push your buttons, huh? Hey, you want a latte or not?"

Nygaard thought about it. "Later. Got to run. I've got an idea."

"Uh-oh. Not an IDEA," intoned Javier sarcastically. "Don't tell me, let me guess. You're off to the studio. The muse is calling. You're inspired."

"No, not the studio. I'm going back to the museum."

"El museo?" said Javier, giving up a high five. "Nevermind, don't tell me. I don't want to know."

Within thirty minutes, Nygaard was back on the third floor. He nodded to the guard, who tipped his cap while continuing to instruct tykes from a day care center about the museum's policy in respect of hands. Please don't touch anything, he told them. The guard then smiled at the two youngish caretakers, both with ponytails. One had long, elegant legs and a short skirt; the other, copying popular vocalists, had three-days growth of beard.

Nygaard found his way back to the Wettin-Willis Collection. Luck was with him. The day-care herd had run off in another direction. Moreover, the old man had set up his French easel in front of *Redivivus*.

Stealthily, Nygaard came up behind him. "Not bad," he said loudly.

The old man, lost in concentration, jump-started. "Oh, you again. What's the time?"

"Don't wear a watch," replied Nygaard. "Towards noon, I think."

"So what do you think?" asked the old man, first pointing at his canvas, then peering at him over spectacles. "Eh?"

"Looks like you know what you're doing."

The old man sized him up. He put down his brush and wiped his hands on a rag hanging from the legs of the paint box. "You know, you didn't answer my question last time," he said. "But, I've been thinking about what you asked; if I've ever had second thoughts about a picture I haven't seen for a while."

"And?"

"A painter's question," said the old man emphatically. "You paint, don't you?"

Nygaard pursed his mouth.

"You left without looking at anything else. Here you are, back again for another look." He was enjoying the speculation and pointing to *Redivivus*. "That's your painting. Isn't it?"

"All I did was ask a hypothetical ques..."

"Been there, done that. Bought the tee shirt, as some say."

"I see. The shirt, too, huh?" He extended a hand. "My name's Tom."

"Then you are the artist." The old man gushed with feigned enthusiasm and clasped his hand, playfully shaking it far too long. "I'm Larch."

"Not William Larch?"

"What?" scowled the old man. "Oh, now don't let's act like you've heard of me."

"No, I just..." Nygaard pointed to the name on the side of the paint-box.

"Ah. That's as well as anyone knows me here," said Larch. "Not exactly in Who's Who. Haven't exhibited anywhere in years and years. Not since back East. Just sell a picture or two in Taos. Send a few to Estes Park now and again. That's about it."

"Back East. Where you from?"

"New York, of course. Name another city back East."

"Sorry. Didn't mean to be provincial."

The old man chuckled.

Nygaard studied the sepia block-in on the easel; draughtsmanlike, devoid of "marking" or anything idiosyncratic. Rather than overtly expressive, it was graceful, its classical foundation readily apparent.

"You said you studied at the Art Students' League?"

"Everyone studied at the Art Students' League. And for a time I was in Chicago, and at the Slade one term. Here and there," Larch replied. "Too many influences, probably."

"Too many?" Nygaard heard the opening he wanted: "Then what about that masterpiece you're copying? Care to review it?"

"A review, huh? All right. I think 'One can't be a bohemian French aristocrat even for the length of a bourgeois forearm.' Yep, I read Yolanda What's-her-face. She got you, all right. But then, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* is no beauty either. Not that you're Picasso. But then, tell me who is?"

"Not Picasso? No reincarnation for you, then."

Larch squinted at him. "What are you talking about?"

-- bad joke... too far to go for nothing...

Nygaard took a breath. "You ever re-work something you thought was finished? Maybe years later. You know, a secondary passage or something."

Again, Larch squinted at him. "You mean something like a length of bourgeois forearm?"

Nygaard grimaced. "Well, yeah. Maybe."

"Ha! Me and Bonnard!" Larch glanced right and left. A smile began to play at the edges of his mouth. "As transparent as you are, you should glaze better than you do." He thought a moment, then said: "You know, such an enterprise requires a diversion. For example..."

"Talking to the guard?" suggested Nygaard quietly, helpfully.

Larch smiled broadly. "Done! Liquin's in the small jar marked linseed. There's dryer, too. Sorry, the brushes are only student grade.""

"No problem. The painting's only student grade."

Larch hesitated, suddenly serious. "You wouldn't have a photo ID, would you?"

Nygaard smiled in exasperation and fumbled about withdrawing a slender wallet from his back pocket.

"Never mind," said Larch. "Just pulling your leg. Talk with you later?"

"I need twenty minutes. The guard likes to discuss the Maillol. Near the elevator. He can do at least twenty on it. Should be enough to tighten an edge or two."

"All right," said Larch, slapping his thighs. "We're off, then. Bon chance."

"Chance? What's that?" said Nygaard, squeezing out a mound of flake white. "Guess I'll owe you some paint."

"Forget it. Always nice to meet the artist, you might say."

Nygaard chuckled. "Then I owe you a coffee. I've got a studio over *Javier's*, if you know the place."

"So-Bart. BFfD, is that it?"

"That's the one."

"Been meaning to try it. Hey... you've got twenty minutes. Get to work."

"Right."

He met with little mental resistance. But then, Nygaard had no foreknowledge that his hard-won truce with doubt and second-guessing, after a series of internal pitched battles of twenty years' duration (The Twenty Years War, is how he thought of it) would someday become the marketing slogan of an athletic shoe-making multinational corporation. Had he known, he would have been appalled that an entire ethical-epistemological system should be reduced to the sound bite *Just do it*, all to the benefit of stockholders. But it was 1987, and Boesky, Levine and Milken had been exposed. There was room still for a rarified sensibility and residual idealism. Never mind that cynical MFA-holders were producing the primitive painting of self-conscious sophisticates, what had come to be called neo-art naif. He knew what he wanted and quickly mixed *jaune brilliant*, *rose madder*, *raw sienna*, *olive green*, *cerulean blue*, and *cobalt violet* in combination with *flake white* and *mars black*. Then he took a number six flat and drug a dab from one mound of color to another, cross-mixing yet again. Then, he "cut an edge" -- a house painter's term he calculatedly employed to stimulate the release of neurotransmitters across synapses between neurons and sensor cells of tiny follicles on the napes of curators' necks.

-- what?

He looked up. He had heard a pattering, but there was no rain on the skylight. He focused again on the length of bourgeois forearm, now becoming as solid as Solidarity. Yes, it was beginning to work.

-- what?

He glanced to the right, then to the left. Nothing. He returned to the articulation of the elbow, then juggled the balance, the visual weight of the line, the mass, and the butt-join of figure and ground. It needed to be just a little more...

"Look! See? That man is painting!!" The sound of chirping birds.

Nygaard wheeled on his heel. A packet of pre-schoolers, their little fingers pointing.

-- the little dears... go away ya bother me...

No point in W.C. Fields, for in no time the two pony-tails had come to see what was the commotion, and they were now staring at him, aghast, their mouths open. Great. He grabbed the paint rag, affected a cough and covered his mouth as he hurried out of the gallery; something soft and oily, under his nose.

"Excuse me," he said, pushing past them to make for the stairs. He forced open the heavy gray door and bounded three flights down to the street. But luck was not with him.

"There you are! Tom!"

It was H. Augustus Rumpman, which the name's bearer thought looked well on slick stock calling cards. The H was for Howard, which associates truncated to Howie. On his arm was the delicious Karen, gliding on stiletto heels, wearing a squash blossom necklace bouncing merrily upon an amply-filled white blouse tucked primly into a tight little black skirt. She was gloriously rounded as an alabaster Arp-ple, yet supple and kinetic. Nevertheless, ran the usual line, what a redundancy to be so inane. Nearly everyone thought she was brainless, although she possessed presence of mind enough to dye her blonde hair a muted auburn. Never mind the reason why; that she saw herself as an alternative alternate. No one understood Karenian Metaphysics. But oh, the groans when she was discussed over the tables at *Javier's*. Of course, this was one way in which she was useful to Gallery Rumpman. It did not matter that so many artists thought she had not a clue. Among other things, she was useful for soothing egos like Nygaard's. And he knew it. But talk about approach and avoidance: every critic of Karen was also a wet dream devotee. On opening nights at the gallery, she was especially effective sitting on the white leather sofa, one leg tucked under the other, absently fingering (too elegant to be thumbing!) *Art News* or Rumpman's coffee table copy of Jansen's. Gents with gin and tonic would engage her in conversation. Soon she was guiding them through the sculpture, paintings, and prints, then past the open bar to the designer jewelry cases. She had rejected a monthly salary in favor of a generous commission and made nearly sixty percent of the gallery's sales. She was doing all right. In the past year, she had risen from a Honda Prelude to a red BMW.

"Hey, Tom! It's me, Auggie." Rumpman waved.

"So it is. Hello, Howie," said Nygaard. "Karen." He nodded. As he removed the rag from his face, he tried to wipe the greasy wetness from above his mouth.

"Don't you carry Kleenex?" said Karen, shaking her head and opening her bag. She took out a kerchief to wipe his face. "Artists without Kleenex. Say... this is paint. Well, I must say you mix a nice flesh tone. But next time you should look in the mirror before leaving the studio."

"Must have forgot."

"Silly boy," she teased, and pinched his cheek. He pulled away, scowling.

"Listen, Tom," said Rumpman, "don't forget the opening Saturday night. I don't want to send Karen around like last time. She needs to be on the floor."

-- i'll say... naked on a bear skin...

"There's a collector from Aspen that's coming in all the way from Chicago..." continued Rumpman.

"You called me yesterday, remember?" said Nygaard. "Twice."

Smiling, Karen intervened. "You'd be missed, you know."

"Karen, Karen..."

"Tommy, Tommy, Tommy..."

"Hey, cut the crap you two," said Rumpman insistently. "This guy's connected. Moorland has his fingers in every pie imaginable. We're talkin' *for real* connected."

"Just connect, I always say."

"He pulled out his thumb, the one stuck up his bum, and he said 'How connected am I?'"

Nygaard raised his eyebrows at Karen, who just had one of her moments.

"Oh, so we're above that. Connections pay the rent, remember? Both of you."

Rumpman always pounded the table when leading trump, but a sense of fairness moved him to add: "And make my mortgage."

-- equity... the milk of humane blindness... the bilk of...

"He bought a place last year," Rumpman continued. "On a lake outside town. He's away a lot, and the wife is tired of the same old walls. You know what that means. You could end up thanking me. I put your name in, for a commission."

"One word in," said Nygaard, "twenty-five percent out. I must remember to genuflect."

"Artists. Why do I bother?" said Rumpman, rhetorically waving his hand and walking away with Karen in tow. "Saturday night. Just be there, all right? Eight o'clock. No later."

"I'll pencil it in."

"Bye, Tommy," said Karen wistfully. "We're off to see your masterpiece. You know, the one Watson-Hines..."

"Ms. Heine-Watanabe," corrected Nygaard.

"Whatever. She's got my curiosity up," said Karen.

"You read a review?"

"And you've got my dander up. Yes, Tom... I often read reviews. Even bad reviews."

"Good review, bad. It's all publicity. It's in the Wettin-Willis, right?" stated Rumpman. "You should be painting like that now. *That*, I could sell. But you know best. Look, gotta go."

"Right," Nygaard replied.

2.

Javier had his head in his hands. A book was face down on a newspaper on his table next to the bakery's main entrance. "What a country," he moaned. "It's just like Yakov says."

"I'm taking bread from the oven. Come help. Hi Tom." Nute appeared for a split second in the doorway.

"Coming soon," responded Javier. "Momento, por favor. Listen, Tom. You know Ford Motor Company?"

"Not personally."

"Very funny. Your government paid money because some windows were broken during the bombing of Cologne. Ford was making everything for the Nazis. Trucks, tanks. But your Uncle Sam, what does he do? Put someone in jail for helping the enemy? No; he writes a check instead. Meanwhile, everyone here is watching MTV."

"That's what? Over forty years ago. World War II," said Nygaard.

"You think that stuff stops? I got to help Nute. Today we make baguette." Javier pushed away from the table and made a curt bow of the head.

"Nice to see you, Javi. This latte's on the house?"

"Always. We have to pay for your painting."

"It's paid already."

"Like it was paid forty years ago. So who cares? Enjoy."

As Javier went in, Nygaard pulled the newspaper from under the book.

"I had to do some fancy talking."

Nygaard looked up to see William Larch, who was panting. He removed his porkpie hat and hung it from a chair. "Nice place."

"Have a seat."

"You were right about the guard. He would have done twenty minutes, I'm sure, except the kids saw you. The curators were pissed, you know. Leaving an easel like that, unattended. Their bark was followed by a smallish bite. My privilege has been suspended indefinitely. It seems the matter will be discussed at some meeting or other. But for now, I may no longer copy in our august museum." His tone had the matter-of-fact delivery of a talking head reading a weather report. "Perhaps you should be sorry about that."

"I'm sorry about that."

"Naw, doesn't matter," he heaved heavily. "Besides, it was worth it. I got a look at it before they took it away to be cleaned. What's-Her-Knobby Up-Her-Heiney would consider it a definite improvement. If the curators had known the artist was the masked man, they might have liked it. Who knows?"

-- doubtful...

Larch lit a cigarette, sucking it into his mouth well past the filter. He clamped down and inhaled deeply, burning half the fag in a single draw. The cigarette was soon spent, the butt flung down and ground under heel. Then his yellowed fingertips found a fresh fag and tamped it three times atop the table. Larch lit between cupped hands, the Marlboro Man, but held his

cigarette in the European manner, between index and thumb. Although this smoke was less hurried, he still placed the stick in his mouth well past the filter.

After croissants and coffee, Nygaard hailed a cab. If not for the old man's flushed face and shortness of breath, he would have foregone this extravagance. All things considered, it seemed modest in comparison with the hire of an ambulance.

The cab came to a curb before a rundown wooden frame in an erstwhile commercial zone. It was not so far from So-Bart, yet it felt like another city. Scrawny, half-strangled trees were concretized along a phlegm-encrusted sidewalk abutting worn and cracked asphalt; a patchwork of indeterminate design trisected by faded variations on a centerline. Loose webs from a schizoid spider, the tangled electrical lines hung drunkenly from tumescent poles saturated with creasote and pressed against porous brick walls impregnated by metallic spray paint, the residue of assaults by homies in Doc Martens; indifferent scrawls that underscored the unlikelihood of breaking out of the neighborhood through discovery by some mogul like Schafrazzi, whom the homies would have despised anyway.

"Welcome to *le tour abolie*," said Larch flatly. He flipped on the lights inside the door and the first thing that caught Nygaard's eye was a row of easels, mounted with cheap, pre-sized canvases stamped 24x36 on the stretchers. He scanned to the end of the row where stood a flimsy busboy cart carrying coffee cans crammed with bristle brushes, jars of indeterminate goo, and a palette piled with scraped skins of Japan-dried sky blue. On the wall was what appeared to be a certificate. Nygaard squinted and read, in gothic script, American Canine Genealogical Society. Beneath this was a verse by Alexander Pope:

I am His Highnesses' dog at Kew.

Pray tell me, Sir: whose dog are you?

And beneath this was a gilt-framed reproduction of *Dogs At Billiards*, which in turn was over a dusty shelf stacked with breeder's journals and fancier's monthlies.

"All my clients are descended from the temple dogs of Thutmose, the hunting hounds of Ethelred the Unready, the lap dogs of Madame de Pompadour; or if you prefer, Marilyn Monroe. A little side business to tide me over when tourists in Estes Park are slow to buy culture. These days, I owe solvency to pooch pedigrees. Beats bagging groceries at a Mom & Pop liquor store. Harmless, really."

"Mail drop?" asked Nygaard nonchalantly.

"Box A083." Larch lit a cigarette and sucked on it. "It's sobering to think capital can be generated by snobbery if an advertisement is properly placed. Mine is six bucks for six months, an inch and a half maybe, in *The Northern Outdoorsman*. You know, if a guy was serious -- say, the way Pet Rocks were marketed a while back..."

"No, thanks. Too depressing."

"But true, nevertheless. It can be done."

"That's what's depressing." Nygaard hesitated. "I mean, if you wanted, you could clean up. Just invest heavily in something I think is stupid. I'm infallible. Whatever it is -- movie, fad, pop song -- if I have a particularly strong aversion, it will make millions. Every other person will want it. But the inverse is true, too. Take *The Living Daylights*. Saw it. Hands

down, Dalton's the best Bond. But the theatre on Friday night? No one. Not enough explosions, maybe. I don't get it."

"Different drummer. You're out of step, that's all."

"Well, sometimes I think I should join the parade."

"You'd trip over yourself. Can't be done. Too late. You should have started in secondary school. Maybe even at the wet nurse's tit. Of course, in my case, I waited until the appointment of a pretty governess; but that's another story."

Nygaard studied the row of easels and noticed that the wooden floor had worn tracks running parallel along its length, and that the wheels of the busboy cart were hard rubber with only a trace of tread. He said: "It appears you've gone into production."

"The next step is workers without green cards." Larch laughed. "This is my personal but historically irrelevant reaction to the industrial revolution. Ridiculous, don't you think? At first, my concern was to express alienated labor. What do you expect from an old unionist? But what happens. Gradually, the paintings became alienated labor. Well, no one understood what I was doing. After a time, neither did I. Starvation inevitably led to indifference to craft and what's the word? -- history profs at the Slade School used it -- *dianoia*. People actually talked that way at the Slade. Thought, that's all it is. Of course, the stuff began to sell, just as soon as I decided *dianoia* didn't matter. Some paradox: painting all the skies; then, all the backgrounds. Back and forth with the cart. Same color, same subject; same, same, same. I suppose the lesson is that alienated labor is expressed best by the real McCoy. In this case, bad painting."

"But the genuine article," said Nygaard, deadpan. "Not a reiteration."

"Hey... that's good," smiled Larch. "I'd jot that down, if I kept a journal."

"The inversion of ideal form. But it would only rise to the level of art if one has some sort of *mens rea*. Ironic intentionality. It's crucial."

"Didn't have it. I was hungry, you see, so ideation fell into line. As if anyone can tell the difference anyway. In my eyes, most people wouldn't know a good painting if it bit them in the... But then, why should they? There's bills to pay and television to watch."

"Authenticity by circuitous route," mused Nygaard. "And, strangely, a return to *dianoia*. Together with a truckload of questions in epistemology. Enough to supply graduate theses for years."

Larch stared at him. "If you're gonna talk like that, we'll need some reinforcement." He shuffled over to a battered roll-top desk, crammed in a corner, and reached down to the lower right drawer. He pulled out a flask, then pointed to a book shelf: "Get me a mug, there, if you don't mind. And one for yourself, if you like."

Nygaard grabbed two cups. He glanced inside to see if they were dirty and saw something filmy at the bottom; but it wasn't grime. He held a cup to the light and saw a translucent black and white photographic miniature of a nude, like an tiger beetle sealed in amber.

"Got that in Hong Kong, after the war," said Larch. "Didn't know the girl, unfortunately. Here... say when." He poured liberally.

"When already. I need to get out of bed tomorrow."

"Right," said Larch. "Though I can't understand why."

"A toast then?"

Larch stood at attention. "A toast. To our wives and sweethearts. May they never meet."

My grandfather always said that and, being a good Mason, he had another one, too. Before going to work of a morning, he would cross himself -- spectacles, testicles, wallet and watch. A bankroller to robber barons and a true Edwardian gentleman."

"Absent friends," said Nygaard. He sipped carefully.

"God save the York rite," said Larch, belting it down.

"Well, pleasant surprise. I was worried there a moment. But this is scotch."

"Then God save the Scotch rite." Larch poured himself another.

They talked on and on into the evening. Larch pulled from the bookshelf one sketch book after another, told about his days at the Slade and the Art Students' League, told old jokes, did bad impersonations, and delighted that much of it was entirely unacceptable.

"Can't tolerate the climate. Everyone with thin skins, suing at the drop of a hat. Political correctness, they call it. And what's that? Secular Puritanism."

Around midnight, the old man could no longer keep his eyes open. When he nodded off, Nygaard collected the cups and washed them in the small sink in a closet, which also had a toilet with a broken wooden lid. There was a small mirror over the sink. Nygaard studied his face, but only for a moment. The naked light bulb was too harsh. It made him look like someone else, he thought. Someone much older.

3.

The Saturday night opening at Gallery Rumpman was for Sanford "Sandy" Eliot. When Nygaard arrived at nine-thirty, he was greeted by polite inquiry about the attack on his painting at the museum. Several sibilant tsk-tsks and one shaking head were the extent of concern. That the inquiries were brief was of some relief to him, for he had difficulty concealing his displeasure at news that the restoration effort was a huge success. Within a few minutes he freed himself and found his way to the open bar. He asked for sherry. The voluptuous bartender dipped from the waist as she poured.

-- ms bar-trix... howie's stocked bar stacked broad... they say the neon lights are bright...

"Have a good evening, Sir," she said, smiling warmly and handing him a glass.

"Thanks." He cast an appraising eye about the gallery. "Packed, isn't it?"

"Yeah. And some of the sardines are already sloshed. Or is it pickled? Besides mixing drinks, I mix metaphors."

-- (sing it!) *on bard-way*... "Metonyms in their case. But no need to sweat the difference, unless you're still in school."

"You got it. French Literature. Working my way through, as you can see. God, what a night. My graduate committee chair is here, swimming with the sardines."

"So have him or her count the long pour as extra credit."

"Him." She smiled and shook her head. "Wish it were that simple."

He nodded. "Well. Time to circulate; but first things first. You may fire when ready, Gridley."

"I get it. Another round? So; if you can't beat 'em, join 'em, eh?"

"I'll take that under advisement," said Nygaard. He raised his glass both to her and to his mouth, economically.

"Quite a space, isn't it?" She let the suggestion float in the air, and when Nygaard did not respond, she continued: "Reminds me of a church."

"Oh yeah? How's that?"

"We could start with the obvious, the cathedral ceilings and the verticality of the windows. The artists are desert prophets or perhaps copyists from the scriptorium; the collectors, donors; the curators, the college of Cardinals; gallery-goers, the parishioners; and, I suppose, the parish priest would be..."

"Lord help us, not Howard Rumpman."

"No. We need him for the tension between church and state, so he gets to be king and worry about the coffers. For a priestly caste, I was thinking critics."

"Which then makes the artwork something like votive tablets, I should think."

"Yeah, sacrosanct. What do you think?"

"Well, I'm probably in no position... I mean, being either a desert prophet, as you say; or a scribe from the copying room..."

"Tom!" A voice boomed from across the room.

"There's the king now," said Nygaard. "If you can't save me, you'll have to excuse me."

"Then you're excused. Unless you want it first?" She reached for a clean glass.

--oh i want it all right...

"Thank you, Gridley."

"Who's Gridley? Call me Ann."

-- ann of cleavage... "Thank you, Ann."

"Tom, Tom!" Rumpman was closing swiftly.

She laughed: "You must be the piper's son..."

"Harrassed and harried. So call me Harry. I'll take that sherry now."

When she gave him the glass, their fingers touched. "'Bye, now" she said.

"Tom! Where you been?" Rumpman extended his hand, then put his arm around Nygaard's shoulder to steer him. "There's someone I want you to meet. Moorland. He's with Sandy Eliot. You must have heard what happened."

-- moorland... eliot... heard happened...

Nygaard had heard nothing and, before he could inquire, or take leave of Ann, Rumpman had pulled him into a large group of cocktail-holders who seemed to be gasping as Sanford Eliot was holding forth:

"They simply had no understanding, much less any appreciation, of my work's... how shall I describe it? *Equipoise*. Its tension. Its release. Its resolution. Completely lost on them; the opposition and reconciliation of manufacture with the natural. And with none of the usual quasi-metaphysical claptrap."

-- oh look sandy's sporting a new earring...

Karen, wrapped in a slinky black dress, was listening attentively. "That this should happen to art, of all things. It's like... drowning a kitten. *Something like this* should never happen."

-- has her moments... but what's this *something*...

What that something was became clear as Nygaard traced ricocheting remarks. The subject was a grant Eliot had received from the National Endowment for the Arts, by a factor of ten more money than any artist in So-Bart had ever seen. Eliot was to produce a piece for the main lobby of the new Samuel F.W.B. Morse Federal Building in Providence. After months of submitting sketches and models to a committee, his proposal received final approval. He then set to work and one week later announced the completion of the piece, which consisted in a scroll of splattered raw canvas hung vertically thirty feet over a galvanized can balanced on a steel beam placed asymmetrically across two boulders.

These elements, as he liked to term them, were moved into the lobby before the construction contractor's final walk-through, and for that reason the art was left uninstalled in case last minute changes had to be made by the workers. Understandably, Eliot did not want to risk damage -- a paint spill, say, or a scratch -- worth better than a hundred thousand dollars, so the elements were placed carefully to the side, against a wall.

However, workmen mistook the rolled canvas for a drop-cloth, and carried it away to a landfill. The steel beam went back to a warehouse, and the boulders went to decorate a stand of front-yard birches. A final problem was distinguishing art from the new federal center's many new galvanized cans. A task force could not find it, and the exasperated foreman had looked directly into a live action cam and said "I guess we're just ignorant people" on the five o'clock news.

"Oh, there must be some mistake," said a large woman. "No one would do..."

"Yes, it's no mistake," assured Rumpman. "A great loss. Words cannot speak... One of Mr. Eliot's very best. A *tragic* loss."

-- fate and hamartia together again and yup no bananas...

Eliot nodded in acknowledgement. He could no longer speak about it.

"Was it insured?" said someone.

"It's van Gogh's ear all over again, isn't it?" came a sympathetic voice. "Artists have to die first."

The discussion soon turned to recent attacks on art, especially the sledgehammering of Michelangelo's *Pieta* and a knife attack upon Rembrandt's *Nightwatch*.

"This happened to Tom, here, too" said Rumpman.

-- thank you howard. Nygaard nodded, but said nothing.

"We're you hurt, dear?" asked a skeptical dowager.

"What else can one expect? When rabble are permitted entry to public treasures." The man who said this looked round for support among the cocktail-holders, who shook their heads uncertainly.

"Madness. Society is sick."

His observation was submerged in a wavelike rumor of the presence of an author of some notoriety. Necks craned to get a glance of L'Gardinier Riche, who lately had been nominated for a Nobel Prize and who was, to nearly everyone's surprise or consternation, standing in the next room.

"Who what?" Rumpman asked Karen.

"A writer," she said. "He's here from London. There was a book-signing at Burnes & Nathan this afternoon."

"A book burning would have served better." The man who said this had made the remark about public treasures.

Nygaard glared at him. "While we're at it, there's the library in Alexandria."

With heavy-lidded eyes, the gray eminence hissed in an undertone: "Piss off."

"What's that, dear?" The woman whom he was escorting said: "I just couldn't finish that business about the Nazis and the Vatican, what was it?"

"*The Holy Roman Empire's Third Reich*," he said dully, turning his back to Nygaard. "In *Rolling Stone*. The tabloid format has been abandoned, I believe."

"Yes, that's it. Scandalous," she said. "The World Council of Churches condemned it, didn't they? And deservedly."

"No, no. They condemned a different one, I think. Something about the Reformers. I have it -- the execution of Servetus, ordered by Calvin. That's it. The persecuted Protestants end up persecuting, and so on. Nonsense. And some other rubbish about trinitarian doctrine."

-- likely not the taiping old man father god and heavenly elder brother jesus of mr. hung hsiu-ch'uan or other responsive reader...

"Yes, the trinity. Of course."

-- of course... twenty million later... but who remembers the dead...

Nygaard knew nothing of Riche's writing other than a work in progress which had been serialized in the literary journal, *Outre Other*. Curiosity got the better of him, so he worked his way through the crowd to another crowd that had gathered around Riche. An acquaintance of Nygaard's, a university professor whose name he could not recall but whose face he remembered,

was engaging Riche in debate.

"Didn't Quintal call it a masque of sophomoric ambiguity? I believe so. But then he's not kind to *Finnegan*, either, is he; nor to Joyce's use of Vico." The professor, gesturing expansively, made a circle in the air with both arms.

-- any questions... or do we need leonardo's proportions as well...

The professor continued: "In the 20th century, every writer has an Oedipal conflict with Joyce, every artist with Picasso, every composer with Schoenberg, and every critic with the unwashed -- although in this last instance, it's the critic who's the bather. I mean father. But I digress. How'd I get off on this? We're discussing..."

"Cyclical returns is it?" asked Riche quietly. "There's one monumentally bad book every century. In the eighteenth, it was *Tristram Shandy*; in the nineteenth, *Moby Dick*; in this century, *Finnegans Wake*. That's Quintal for you. The Bad Penny Theory."

"Well, what do I know?" asked the professor rhetorically. "I just read his reviews. Even his raves of your books!"

-- o irony...

Riche smiled. "You realize, of course, he's especially insightful in my case."

This remark was followed by nervous laughter from those who wanted to appear to have read not only Riche's book, but also Quintal's review of it. The professor patted Riche on the back, familiarly. "Touché," he said.

-- good boy you're my kinda writer how about some wine for my friend here...

"Critical readings are probably wrong-headed, in every case, aren't they?" The speaker was a woman whom Nygaard recognized as the museum's curator of interpretation. For several minutes, she had been listening with mounting agitation.

Riche did not respond immediately, but looked quizzically at his interlocutor. She must have come directly from the office, for her identification badge was pinned to the lapel of her pinstripe. "Don't you think that painters or poets might be reliable interpreters of their own work?" he said.

"That notion comes from the nineteenth century view of the critic as a jackal, at best, or a parasite, at worst." The curator moved to the center of the discussion.

"Isn't it art, music and literature which make criticism possible?"

-- the nimzo-native american defense... a public tutorial... a duel, not a discussion...

"Don't you think that criticism is no less autonomous than an art which relies upon the art which has preceded it? Certainly your own *Book of Common Obsession* would be..."

"I think there can be art without criticism, but perhaps not criticism without art."

"Criticism has its own field of activity," insisted the curator. "We all know the fate of art without criticism. Cultural memory gets lost. Civilization gets brutalized."

Riche's tone became icy : "Then that explains it. No wonder Shakespeare butchered his sources. He was writing in the absence of critics."

-- bishop's gambit refused... played this before...

"Straw man. No one accepts, on faith, the authority of authors. Not anyone reputable. Not anymore. Especially when it comes to interpreting their own works. Authors, I mean. And as for artists on art, forget it; they're notoriously inarticulate."

"So we're fortunate to have the authority of the critic?"

"Look. Don't you write for some kind of ideal reader? An informed reader? You *need* critics. Literature simply does not speak. Didn't MacLeish write that a poem is mute, dumb, and wordless?"

"It took words to call poems wordless. So critics, what? Exist of necessity?"

"Necessity!? How 18th century! Surely we ought not to subordinate criticism to any externally derived critical attitude. How can anyone argue otherwise? After De Man! Criticism is a... a frame... a structure of knowledge in its own right."

"If, as you insist, criticism has its own field and is an independent structure, then let critics write about criticism. We have *Artists On Art*."

"And that's authority? Get real! We're a baker's dozen years from a new millennium, and that much farther from all the old Judeo-Christian lockstep bugaboos. We're on the verge of..."

-- somnambulism... narcolepsy... bread and circuses everyone's distracted or asleep... the 90s will make the 50s look like the 60s...

"...no, not verge. We're in the midst of a paradigm shift," enthused the curator. "The realization of unmediated intentionality. Something akin to pure will, as Nietzsche writes it. Our own divinity. Something new. Completely new."

"Yes," said Riche patiently. "The eternal recurrence of the completely new, to paraphrase Northrop Frye."

This was said without overt sarcasm, or at least Nygaard heard the remark this way: a simple reminder of one well-known confusion in the philosopher's aphorisms. Still the curator continued to follow the implications of this line, with all moves known in advance; a pointless, over-rehearsed exercise. Nygaard listened a little longer, decided he had heard enough and would do better to make his way to the bar; but he was stopped by the professor whose face he recalled but whose name he could not remember.

"Can you believe it? That fraud being nominated for a Nobel Prize!" The professor was quite drunk.

"The point being?"

"The point being, *hic*" the professor burped, "that Riche is a maker of schisms. Not unlike yourself, I'm told. *Hic*, Nygaard, isn't it? So, what sort of reward would you expect for him? A laurel wreath? Do you think heaven is a reliable expectation, Mr. Nygaard? Is our *hic* fabulous artificer really in contention for the Dedalus Cup?" The professor drew a deep breath and held it.

-- backhand overhead smash... how to return... lob...

After a moment's hesitation, Nygaard replied: "If you get a chance, read the *Anguttara Nikaya*. Where Buddha is speaking to his monks about Devadatta, not Dedalus; the guy who caused a schism in the order and departed with hundreds of followers. The Buddha believed that Devadatta was out of his mind and doomed to suffer in hell. Without reprieve or waxed wings. Nope; no prizes for our heretic... no layovers at O'Hare... no last-minute spots on late-night talk shows. And no tenure." Nygaard swirled the wine in his glass and watched the track lights race round its rim.

The professor exhaled, rocked back on his heels, then gathered himself. "I'm not the Buddha, Mr. Nygaard. I'm a medievalist. And Quintal's right. Riche's prose is a turd of the third-water. You will excuse me."

"Surely." He drained his glass. The professor disappeared into the crowd. The barely contained rancor brought the memory home. The professor, Nygaard now recalled clearly, he had met once before, a dozen years ago, when he was painting *Redivivus*. He recalled the estranged and beautiful wife who supported herself, during a lengthy separation and divorce, by working as a waitress when she was not modelling for him. There was the scene at the studio, the professor barging in with righteous indignation just as she was dressing to leave. In retrospect, Nygaard felt he had been wrong and the professor right, though their reasons were poles apart. There was the minor scuffle, mostly for form's sake. The professor had grabbed her roughly and Nygaard had pulled his arms behind his back and waltzed him out the door. Then he found a clean paint rag to dry her eyes and became her lover. Six months? More? How had he forgot the smooth skin behind her ear?

"There you are! Howie's looking all over for you." Karen did a graceful pirouette, then took hold of his arm. "So how do I look?"

"Like dessert. But I think you know that."

"Don't you say the sweetest things? Come with me, and behave yourself. We need first to find..."

-- howard the first... where's ann of cleavage... and the last...

"...But, I know what you're thinking. Yes, he wants you to meet someone. Yes, it's a commission. Yes, you should do it for once."

"Was I thinking all that?"

"Please. You think I don't know you?"

Rumpman stood chatting with the man introduced as Moorland. He said little other than to extend an invitation for Nygaard to visit his cottage, where they might discuss something he had in mind. Rumpman suggested the following morning would be fine, if Mr. Moorland were available. Moorland appointed ten o'clock. He shook Nygaard's hand and excused himself.

"See? That wasn't so bad, was it," teased Karen.

"Shall we pick you up, say nine-thirty?" said Rumpman.

"I'll meet you there. What's the address?"

Rumpman wrote the address on a check deposit slip. Nygaard folded it neatly and put it in his trouser pocket. He said goodnight to Karen, then went to find the bartender. Literature. Ask and ye shall receive. Or be careful what you ask, for you just might get it. Which was it, he would have to find out. The lights were now dimming, the music was lowering, the crowd was thinning.

And Ms. Bar-Trix was leaving with the professor.

4.

Javier held his head in his hands. Nute stood patiently with arms folded, her head leaning against the door jamb.

"In 1980 our Uncle Sugar paid out 45 billion in interest on the national debt. Bankers are doing okay. Subsidies for the rich..." Javier said gloomily.

"Sub-- arai na?" said Nute, not comprehending. "Mai waa arai?"

"Si. Subsidies. But half that or less for welfare. Es verdad."

"Where do you get this stuff?" asked Nygaard absently. He spoke neither Spanish nor Thai, and he was waiting for Rumpman who had written on the bank deposit slip, "9:30 we will come for you."

"Newspaper socialista," replied Javier. "This is the truth. You read and you know."

Nute, now done with listening and waiting, said: "Dishes are high like the mountain. This also es verdad. Sometimes I think to dispo my esposo. Tii rak, na. But he can cook?" This was a statement, but because Thai is tonal, Nute often goofed English intonation. Nygaard knew that much. Otherwise, she might have passed for a Valley Girl.

A black Mazda with tinted windows came to the curb. Its door opened mysteriously.

"I think the Mafia are here," said Javier. "Or maybe your ride?"

"Rumpman," said Nygaard. "Like the car, huh? Now figure this: he also wears sunglasses when he's driving. What do I owe you?"

"Nevermind," said Nute. "Go."

Except for the usual pleasantries, no one said anything on the drive to Moorland's. Karen gazed abstractly out the window. Nygaard was vaguely uncomfortable sitting with her in the rear seat, with Rumpman playing chauffeur. His furtive glances at her chiseled knees were followed by sly passing glances at the rearview mirror which met only a Rumpmanian void of sunglasses reflecting the mirror reflecting the sunglasses; an infinite regression in a fracture of time. So back to the here and now of her knees, and the smoothness which disappeared under a short skirt. She half turned her head and smiled, but he looked away, a refusal to acknowledge the implication of an uncomfortable erection.

Out the window, the downtown glare of gray glass segued to pocket parks, convenience marts, and men in jogging togs mowing lengths of lawn. Soon there were arboreal islands in the midst of the fresh asphalt whose meanderings Rumpman navigated effortlessly past tree-shaded tributaries named Natchez Road, Briarwood Place, and Richelieu Circle where a narrow dog leg to the right became a poplar-lined serpentine drive. Minute gravel crunched crisply under radial tires as the car came to a halt before a high wall and wrought iron gate.

A sign said *Private No Solicitors (or Barristers)*.

-- sense of humor at least... "This is it?" asked Nygaard.

"The cottage itself," said Rumpman, unbuckling his seat belt. "We have arrived."
"Sound the trumpets," said Karen, disembarking.

A dog barked in the distance. Rumpman glanced at his watch, then pushed a button on an intercom. A scratchy and disembodied voice said: "Who is it?" Rumpman's self-verification was followed by a loud buzz prompting someone, anyone, to push the gate, a task accomplished by Nygaard once the signification of the buzz became clear to him.

"You are such a gentleman," said Karen. She lived in a world of high-rise apartments and assumed everyone was familiar with such security. She and Rumpman filed past and, as Nygaard pulled the heavy gate closed, there was the ponderously dull click of a cinematic cellblock. Yet he had the strange perception that the sky was suddenly azure, as though a cloud had lifted. Water, the lake perhaps, or possibly an olympic pool, was visible through heavy shrubbery and a labyrinth of trees.

-- o forest and trees, o birdies and bees... a elbereth gilthoniel... sermons in stone and books in the running...

"Some spread, huh?" said Rumpman as they proceeded up a long cobblestone walk.

-- like to spread... Nygaard watched Karen's elegant and vaguely equestrian legs straining against slipping.

"Love these stilleto heels." She knew he was looking, without having to look. She often felt this critical eye.

"You need a book balanced on your head," he said.

"And elocution lessons?" she replied.

"No, just balance the bulletin from night school."

"Why don't you stuff it."

-- stuff stick jam cram slam bam thank y'ma'am...

"Hey now, you two. Call a truce, will ya" said Rumpman earnestly. "This is it. Or can't you tell."

"All right. Cease fire, then," said Karen in mock pleading. "Okay Tom?"

"Why not," he shrugged. He counted four steps, then said: "Long walk. There's a house, I believe?"

"No," said Karen. "As a matter of fact, according to an old map, beyond that hedge there be monsters." She pointed.

"Never know when to stop," said an exasperated Rumpman, pushing his sunglasses up on his forehead as though better to see. He motioned: "Just over there."

They rounded luxuriant lilacs and the house came into view. Karen fell silent and stopped.

"According to the usual measures, yes."

"How's that, Tom?" said Rumpman.

"This must be it. Yes. I can tell."

Karen was nonplused. "Wow, Howie. So this is how the other half..."

"Come on," urged Rumpman. "We're expected."

The cottage, as Moorland called it, belonged to no definite period nor to any architectural style. From the outside, a person who had never been inside would instinctively guess that the three hardwood or marble floors, each with its library and fireplace, were conversed by hardwood or marble stairs, and divided into commodious compartments with walk-in closets with racks upon which hung single-stitched linen or polished cotton shirts in pastel colors arranged according to hue; that there would be Italian boots, saddle oxfords, wingtips and deck shoes sorted by an Aristotelian cross-classification system; that the cottage's two wings would each have kitchen walls with shining skillets hanging and earthen jars bristling with wooden spoons, egg whisks, and spatulas arranged before long, neat rows of cloves, saffron, dill weed, and ginseng in apothecary jars; that all nine bathrooms would have showers with pulsating heads and sunken tubs; that French doors would open from a first floor atrium onto a recital room with a grand piano; that a masterpiece by Sisley or Caillebotte would adorn the inner sanctum of Moorland's private study; that the front door would be carved and massive; and that a gentleman's gentleman of requisite reserve would accept one's card and announce one's presence after answering a discreet door bell. However, as often happens when one is on the outside, one would have been mostly mistaken.

The bell was answered by a fortyish woman wearing a sweatshirt and faded trousers. She was barefoot and smoking a cigarette.

"Hello," she said. "You must be from the gallery? Sorry I couldn't come to the opening last night. I had a migraine, but today's better. Won't you come in?"

It was a kind of mudroom, with footwear thrown here and there and last winter's coats hanging from an unstable hall-tree leaning against a straight-back chair piled with periodicals. A closed door suggested a small closet. The woman ushered them through a stained glass door into a spacious but severely spare room with high ceiling and Scandinavian furniture. A single glass orb depended from a large Palladian window and refracted a rainbow across a bare white wall. On an empty book shelf under the window was a potted cactus, flowering, and on a low table were two lacquer ware bowls of white and black stones polished to low lusters. The bowls were atop a playing board.

"We're still moving in, I'm afraid. I'm Catherine," she said extending her hand to Karen. After Rumpman and Nygaard were greeted, she summoned a mute Asian maid, who stared at the hardwood floor, to bring tea and pound cake. "That's Ming, or Ting, or Ning... one of three sisters. They started this week, and I still can't remember who's who. Shy, all of them. But then, they've spent the last year in a camp on the Cambodian border. Sorry. I forget sometimes that's a world away. We are here to discuss art, are we not? Mr. Moorland is down at the lake and will be here presently. Would you excuse me? I need to wake a sleeper upstairs."

She hurried up a spiral stair that could have come from a missile silo. Actually, it went up to an observatory where a telescope was trained on dwarf nebula.

Just as the maid laid out a tray on the low table, Moorland entered the room. His sleeves and pant legs were rolled and damp.

"Forgot the time. I've been swabbing," he said. "Or, at least I think that's the term used by landlubbers with new sailboats. Ah, tea."

The four sat and talked for an hour. Moorland and his wife, Catherine, would be several weeks in Europe -- in fact, most of the summer. When they returned, they hoped to have a house warming gala for perhaps two hundred of their closest friends and business associates. There would be caterers and an orchestra, but the top billing would be a piano recital by Catherine, who had resumed practicing after many years. She would be ready to perform Chopin and Scarlatti after a summer's tutoring. During their absence, they would like a frieze to be painted along the wall just beneath the ceiling of the piano room, a decorative band of perhaps eighteen inches in width. This would be, of a certainty, no real challenge to someone of Nygaard's ability; but there was an additional work also to be commissioned: a three-quarter life-size portrait of Catherine at the piano. This painting would be unveiled after her performance.

"It should be," said Moorland thoughtfully, "something grand, but not over-weening. Something -- how shall I convey it? -- in the manner of Sargent, say."

-- oh, i think you've conveyed quite enough...

Nygaard cringed. He had had no clue that this was in store. But of course, of course, how stupid he had been.

"Splendid," said Rumpman. "We will discuss the proposal and answer by midweek."

"That will be fine," said Moorland. "The guest house will be made available. I assume that an artist would prefer to be in residence while working. Catherine's sister is staying here to run the place in our absence. Should Mr. Nygaard have need of anything, she will be the keeper of accounts and keys, so to speak. And the maids will prepare meals. One can arrange the menu, of course."

-- freedom to choose sauc'eggs's easyo'er sunnyside wheat 'r rye...

The ride home was unpleasant. This time, Karen sat in the front passenger's seat and sampled different cassette tapes trying to find music to mask the tension after Rumpman had

mentioned the Great Unspoken; namely, that Nygaard's painting's were not selling, and had not sold for six months. Some recovery of advancements paid against potential sales was required.

"Hell, Tom, the guy's connected. It might lead to something. I mean, let's face it, this has not been a banner year. We thought Wettin-Willis would pick things up, especially if you got publicity. And you did -- negative, no need to add -- but at least they spelled your name right, as the saying goes. So what's happened and where are we? Nothin' -- and up to here in red ink, is where. I mean, we've got to do something. You've got to do something. So this commission isn't exactly what you want..."

"Not exactly what I want?"

"...so what? You'll be flush again, maybe have a little extra when it's over, who knows? Like I keep saying, the guy's connected."

"The guy's connected, the guy's connected, for chrissakes How'..."

"Look, you ivory tower smart ass son-of-a-bitch. I've been covering for you for months now. Why? Don't ask me! You're a second string regional painter. Hell, you're not even that anymore. Eliot's that. Right now, you're not even a second stringer in So-Bart. Or haven't you noticed. Look, Tom. I like your work. I don't always understand why you do what you do, but I think you've got something. I mean, why else put up with all this aggravation? You are not the easiest person to be around, you know. Reliable? Forget that! And so Moorland falls into our lap... You should be... I've been pushing you, Tom. Karen knows it, don't you Karen. I mean, you really don't know. But to be flat honest with you, Tom, this is the only thing I can find for you right now that isn't house painting."

"It could be the break you need right now, Tom," said Karen. "I mean, Moorland's world is a whole lot wider than So-Bart."

-- yeah. bffd.

Rumpman dropped Nygaard at Javier's and, to his surprise, Karen said she wanted an Irish coffee. They sat together without talking for some time. Nygaard knew how she saw herself, but being soothed and patronized was not the sort of therapy he wanted just now. Nor did he want a frank discussion. He had quite something else in mind, something he had avoided for some time because he knew it was possible and knew it would be easy. But things were different this time, and the old reasons did not matter. Nothing mattered. He was sure. So he showed her up to his studio, poured two small glasses of sherry and fucked her.

It was white-hot angry, but a controlled performance. Could she tell? She was so busy heaving and moaning and clawing his back that it almost felt like the real thing:

5.

-- umh umh umh aaaa umh umh ohhh aaaa umh yes umh yes umh yes umh umh umhhhh umh take umh that umh and umh umh umh aaaa umh ohhh that and that umh that and ohhh ohhh umh not umh oh yet not yet umh umh you umh round n round n u umh umh umh f'k umh youuu youcuntumhf'kumh u umh we umh f'k we is is is issssss yes yes yes oh no no noooo oh umhhhh umh umh stop f'k u f'k we f'k we f'kinnnnnn we fffffff'k go slow nowumh stop umh no don't stop

go yessss umh umh umh come on come on come on you you ohhh you ohh u gorgeous fk'ingg
wh'rumh umh now umh what'sgodyou're umh umh umh ohyesohyou'reso umh so umh sssssso
fflllllllll umh umh umh umh beaut ohh ful yessss deep deeper now yessss now c'me c'me c'me
aaaa unh oh unh yes unh ohhh unh yes unh yes unh yes unh yes you oh oh yessssss unh-unhh
unh all unh you unh right here right now unh all you unh oh you unh oh every ummmgg rright
here now oh that and that and that and unh unh u-h-h unh that-n-u-h-h-h-h-aaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhh
ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh oh oh my god ohhhhyes... nohhhuuuuuuuuuuaa-oo-ohhhh whyyyy
you... you.

It was growing dark. She had fallen asleep almost immediately after pushing away from him. There was no meeting of eyes, no exchanging of words, no lighting of cigarettes. Karen was asleep now, her face turned toward a blue shadow suddenly angled across the wall as the fluorescent lamp on the street corner flickered to life, the evening's bustle began at Javier's below, and an odor wafted through the floor cracks up from the pizza oven.

Nygaard assessed the curves, hollows, and swellings beside him, the turn of ankle and taut abdomen. He had been wrong about implants, but maybe not about a nose job. He saw a small scar on her left shoulder, the kind of chink a sculptor might make if a piece were too perfect, and he felt almost relieved. He kissed the shoulder, then rolled onto his back, to stare at the ceiling.

- what a mess.

6.

Catherine Moorland was all sixes and sevens. "We'll just need to..." She gestured vaguely.

Tidy up a bit would surely have been the end of the sentence. There were stacked boxes and odds and ends in three of four corners of the guesthouse's sitting room. The maids had not understood her instructions. "Well, I guess the drafting table stays. You'll be needing that, won't you?"

"Yes. Thank you."

"Actually, it arrived yesterday. I hope it's what you want."

-- oh really...

"I'll ask the gardener to move everything to the west wing," she continued. "He's due here after lunch. Comes twice each week."

-- automatic as sprinklers on a lawn with a life of its own...

Nygaard had dreaded the return to the "cottage" on the lake. Karen had brought him in Rumpman's car, and the drive had been businesslike, although she did remark the budding lilacs along the path. He had not seen her since the tryst at the studio, and he had no recall of her

departure. She must have awakened while he was asleep. When Ling or Bing or Ding answered the doorbell, Karen wished him luck and returned to the city.

"I'm sorry," Nygaard had said to the maid. "I don't know your name."

She smiled serenely. "Serena," she said.

"That's Spanish, isn't it?"

"Macao Portugal," she said. "Everyone think I Vietnam. You nice. You ask Serena."

"Yes, I see," said Nygaard, remembering the earlier mention of camps on the Cambodian border. He thought momentarily of photographs of the Khmer Rouge's killing fields.

Apparently things were not so straightforward as the maid's being a refugee. Perhaps her persona was a guise in the quest for a green card -- and that would be her business. He decided he knew more already than he wanted to know. The maid ushered him to a study where Catherine was at a writing desk. She looked up, smiled, sealed an envelope, then walked with him to the guesthouse.

"So what do you think? Liveable?" Catherine asked.

Nygaard had seen the single-burner stove in the kitchen nook, the tiled floor and heavy towels in the shower room, and the adjoining room's bunk bed and chest of drawers. There was a video cassette player and, on the portable television, a stack of cassettes with felt-tip scrawls on their spines such as Scenes from La Boheme.

-- and don't forget toscas... "Yes, it's fine," said Nygaard. "It will do."

"I must remember to introduce you to my sister; but first it's time we made the excursion to your theater of operations. Besides, who knows? Perhaps she'll emerge from the den after we visit the recital room, and we can have a bite." She shrugged. "Tea and cucumber sandwiches?"

The recital room was intimate, its eighteenth century piano a deeply polished ebony with golden hinges at the sound-box and legs with lion's paws. But these did not stay Nygaard's eyes from dancing immediately through glazed French doors that opened into a ballroom airy with luminescence from a leaded glass vault twenty feet or more above the hardwood floor. There was another exposure, the rational clearstory of the recital room, the visible light from which melded its parergonal space, rendering the surround of tangibly bare walls a paradoxically ethereal and shadowless presence. With the French doors open, all demarcation between the recital room and ballroom became displaced, even dissolved. The effect was essentially oblivious and heady.

-- lobster quadrille with baudrillard...

"I love these rooms," said Catherine Moorland. "My husband hides in his library; I hide here." Then, facing him directly, she said: "Have you a hiding place, Mr. Nygaard?"

He mustered a polite smile. "Oh, that."

She laughed. "Perhaps the guesthouse, as soon as the gardener removes the boxes. Yes, it's all a little... overwhelming at times. But one gets used to it."

When they sat down for brunch, she discussed the pending sojourn in northern Italy and her excitement to be again playing piano seriously; a bicycle tour of Greece she hoped to arrange for spring the following year; past travels in Kenya and her admiration for Baroness Blixen, the writer Isak Dinesen; left-hand-to-the-wall treks through the mazes at Hampton Court, Hatfield House, Longleat, Kentwell Hall, Chatsworth, and Saffron Walden; and a white water rafting jaunt down the Snake River which, at the time, she considered tedious and too much trouble, although the recollection had since become a fond one with a certain patina. When she had exhausted her reserve of entertaining stories, irritation at the absence of her sister came to the foreground. She excused herself to speak with Ning or Ling (not Serena) who raised her palms upward and shook her head. Vexed momentarily, Catherine strode briskly back to the table.

"I'm so sorry; my sister appears to have slipped away. Really, it's most inconvenient and I must apologize. I want to introduce her, especially because we have had to move up the date of our departure and she doesn't know. But how could she, when I haven't seen her for two days. We're packed. We leave tonight. Everything is changed. Before Italy, we are off to Hong Kong. Really, I couldn't keep a schedule like hers. What am I saying, 'schedule.' She freelances. Feast or famine."

Nygaard was given keys to the guesthouse and to the outside door nearest the ballroom. Catherine Moorland explained that an account at Artysaurus Supply had been opened, and he only needed to charge whatever he wanted. He could take whatever he wanted from the wine cellar, freezer chests or liquor cabinet. If he fancied, he might use the twelve-foot sailboat. Moorland's new boat would have to stay docked, however. He was free to invite guests, although she hoped permission would not turn into license such as former friends had once claimed for themselves; for after that little fiasco, carpets had to be replaced. Still, that was their other cottage, she said, the way one might say 'that was in another life.'

As soon as Catherine Moorland and her bags departed at three-thirty for a flight to meet her husband at LAX, Nygaard was on the telephone with a clerk at Artysaurus. Conveniently, the delivery truck would be making rounds in the morning. He spent the late afternoon pacing in the ballroom, studying the receding light on the wall. When the skylight failed, he turned on the track lights and looked through photograph albums left for Catherine's portrait. The Moorlands would return in September, so he had to complete the faux Sargent and a decorative frieze in fourteen weeks, which he decided to call twelve as margin for error.

That first night, he could not sleep. The first few days settled into a routine of early morning coffee on the lawn, drawing, lunch followed by more drawing, swimming in the late afternoon topped by an icy cold pilsener out on the dock, then dinner, a video, fifty pushups, a shower and bed. It almost felt like purposefulness, almost seemed like discipline. At the end of the first week, he spent an entire day staring in the ballroom.

The portrait began uncertainly. Nygaard had crumpled or ripped drawing after drawing. He settled upon painting directly, but ended stabbing the canvas with a palette knife. More days passed in impasse until, in frustration, he began to make a parody. He painted Catherine in riding habit, sitting at the grand piano, with tea service and an astrolabe on the bench and a bicycle alongside, leaning against an enormous and florid Ming dynasty vase. It was utterly, ridiculously Edwardian grand manner, the calculatedly casual placement of artifacts signifying character and breadth of interest to rival Holbein's *Ambassadors*. The Moorlands, he decided,

wanted their egos fed, and this fact precluded any sensitivity to satire. Besides, they couldn't tell Holbein from Sargent anyway. And they certainly wanted no painting of his, although, in a way, they were about to get one.

-- maybe a series twenty-four by thirty-six like larch's easels why not give 'em what they've paid for no imagination just imprimitura, scumble, glaze... brio senza sordino by the book but hey tomasso... why the renaissance revival i'll tell you it's like this: ma quella folgora nel mio sguardo si chi da prima il viso non sofferse...

Nygaard had been glad to be done with Dante. Years ago. He remembered a dinner party, when he and his classmates were sitting around a huge wooden spool from the telephone company, appropriated for a table and covered with a red and white checkered cloth borrowed from Little Caesar's, candles in the necks of empty bottles of Mateus Rose, an odd assortment of tableware spread around a mountain of spaghetti noodles in a stoneware bowl recently fired at the university's kiln, sauce simmering on the stove, and everyone getting stoned or drunk. All the guests had brought paintings, poems, records or pot to Nygaard's rundown rental on this night of communion, a last supper before the rite of passage, the weekend's graduation ceremony. Snodie was there, Brownman was there, Marlowe, Murray, and Singer. There were girls, too, but he did not remember names. In those early days of the movement for women's liberation, co-eds were ornamental but inchoate; electric earth-mothers valued around three-fifths of a person.

It was Singer who liked polemics. He had sat silently through confessions of future plans, dreams, his eyes darting from face to face. He was from Brooklyn. Yes, he had a beard, Nygaard remembered. The conversation had ranged widely, as if each young man were an alpha male with a new rack of antlers. The cows had feigned interest, but their attention became real as Singer called Nygaard to account.

"You're disappointed?" Singer had asked.

"Disappointed? No, I just mean it's too bad, that's all. There's no great wall painting any more. No one's doing them. It gets no support."

"You mean you want us to go back to a feudal society so you can paint frescoes?" Singer had asked in exasperation. "Well fuck that."

"But foundations could..."

"Corporate feudalism. They're like independent states," Singer had claimed. "They rip off billions and hand out a million here and there. For what? Image. So-called philanthropy."

No one took Singer seriously, because everyone knew he was returning to New York where a job in the family company had been waiting for him since high school. Besides, Singer was graduating in economics and history which, to Nygaard, who had studied little or nothing of either, seemed a mismatched pair far from the action. In retrospect, he knew it was amazing anyone could have come through the late sixties and early seventies with such a notion. But the art goddess, however, was alluring: she was sophisticated and distracting, and she sat astride the mundane monster world. Suitors such as the hopefuls gathered around the table (except for Singer who was pooh-poohed), did not notice the old broad was both in the cup and spilling it.

And there was so much to absorb, so many influences. Nygaard thought the legacy of all those classes in art history, rather than merely making the world diachronically orderly, had also made every school or style that ever existed seem like a local development. One became heir to

everything, yet nowhere grounded: the main difference between living in the villages of Massacio and McLuhan.

After a day blowing off steam, he put the canvas away in favor of nude figure studies. He did not seek Ping or Ching or Ding to pose, because he understood on some level that they might not appreciate a barely repressed primal desire nor a rarefied sense of exotica, which seemed such an elaborate joke after many days of no real conversation and much debate over whether to call Karen. So he drew from memory models from school, women from the past, images from movies or imagination. Gradually, his distraction gave way to absorption, if not exactly inspiration. He became Monet's ideal, an eye and a hand, unmediated, integrated, focused, in the zone (as one of Moorland's many books on how to play better tennis described it).

"My breasts are perfectly symmetrical. Exactly the same size and shape. Most women have one breast slightly larger, so the shapes vary. But mine are perfect."

When Nygaard looked up, once his eyes met hers, he knew he was facing Catherine's sister -- an obviously younger sister braless in a tight baby blue sweater, midriff bare -- the one whose unseen presence for days had been coming and going. There had been only the sounds of doors opening and closing while he tried to work, and occasionally dirty dishes or half consumed beverages or slices of toast on trays on sink-boards, and ashtrays of ground-out cigarettes, almost always half-smoked.

"You're the one who painted a length of bourgeois forearm, aren't you?" she smiled. "What fun."

"Then you know Ms. Heine-Watanabe," observed Nygaard, without smiling.

"Never met her, though you could say I'm familiar with her work."

Nygaard puzzled the statement, but let it ride. "You're Catherine Moorland's sister."

"Rosalva."

"Your sister said you freelance."

"A journalist, I suppose, if a Masters qualifies." Rosalva glanced over his shoulder at the drawing in progress. "Interesting," she said. "Over the years I have come to the point I can tell when a woman has been painted by a man. There is such doting attention paid to breasts. I think woman haven't this curious obsession."

Nygaard weighed the implication, then said: "Oh, I don't know. Last year there was an exhibition of lesbian art that seemed dotingly attentive to me. Or do I mean obsessive."

-- and who'll forget the how-to book of adonises fondling themselves in sepia and sanguine by an illustrative woman... foster publications was it...

"Mind if I smoke?" asked Rosalva, removing a slim case from the thigh pocket of her army surplus pants. She lit up and sat astride a chair, backwards, her arms over the ladderback.

"Suit yourself."

She exhaled a long train of smoke. "Mind if I watch?"

Nygaard cocked his head but did not respond. She was playfully enjoying his discomfiture and he found it annoying but challenging.

"Go on," she said. "Draw. I want to watch."

Nygaard put down his pencil, folded his sketchbook and asked: "Do you always insist on being the center of attention?"

"Almost always. But not this time."

"I see." Nygaard sized her up. "And your breasts, being perfectly symmetrical, must be implants."

She laughed. "Bold after all. I like that. No, they're real enough. They're just perfect, that's all. Care to see? Or would you rather work from your head."

-- 've read art as experience thank you. dewey do we do it...

7.

Rosalva Isla des Caribes y Sila had gone by Rosalva Alisebirac since an internship at *Outre Other* had sent her to write about a medical school in Guadalajara, Mexico. As a freelance, she told Nygaard, she used this name and others. In this way she could write several pieces for the same magazine and none would be the wiser. Or, she laughed, this could be interpreted to mean that no one would learn anything no matter how much she wrote. Nevertheless, writing paid the bills, and covered what a scholarship did not, while she was completing a doctorate of philosophy in literary theory. She had just turned twenty-nine and wanted to finish before The Big Three-Oh.

"Oh yes," said Nygaard, "the big one. Assessment time." He turned onto his side to look at her.

"Nothing so drastic as that. Besides I'm having too much fun... well, undercover. I know, bad pun. It's an ice age ago, but do you remember Gloria Steinem as a Playboy bunny? You know, she worked at a club and then wrote about it."

"Ahh... her *cause célèbre*."

"I did something similar in Guadalajara."

"You were a bunny?"

"I'll tell you if you promise not to laugh. Promise?"

"Without crossed fingers."

"I was a singer at a hangout for med students. Expatriates mostly; so that's why the covert operation. Someone thought the school was a degree mill. Now stop that; you promised, remember?"

"Can't help it. You, tilting at windmills."

"Degree mills. Besides, I'm not Donkey H."

"You want to run that by me again?"

Rosalva poked him in the side. "Don Quixote. Donkey H."

Nygaard tried to suppress a smile. "Was it a degree mill?"

"Never found out. There were some problems and I didn't finish the assignment. But the point is that I'm at it again as part of my dissertation."

"And?"

"Dare I tell you? It'd be fraternizing with the enemy."

"Your destiny calls and you go..." chanted Nygaard quixotically.

"Mine own cantus firmus. No guts, no glory."

"What are you talking about?"

"Going undercover. I'm doing it. In So-Bart."

"Espionage in So-Bart. In So-Bart? What's so... Come on!"

"In a way. I'm researching the alternates. The twenty-something postmodernists. You know... the ones with green hair. How they live, how they think, their influences, their relation to mass media and the establishment... All that."

"Establishment? In So-Bart?" Nygaard was incredulous.

"Yes, establishment," said Rosalva. "The museum. The dealers. The collectors. The older artists who may or may not be in the Wettin-Willis Collection."

"Wet Willie? You think being in Wet Willie equates with being in the establishment, as you call it?"

"None of the alternates has a commission to paint Catherine's portrait, now do they."

Nygaard puzzled her retort. He bit her playfully on the nipple, then rolled onto his back. She had hit an unexpected nerve.

"Time to get up," she announced. "Have to get to work. And so do you."

She was gone several days. After Nygaard had the portrait underway, he invited Larch over to see the ballroom and sent a cab to collect him. Ping or Qing or Ying prepared a lunch of tacos with horseradish and soy sauce followed by vanilla ice cream topped with creamed corn. Then came coffee flavored with condensed milk and creme-filled sandwich cookies.

Sandwiches. Nygaard had asked for egg salad and Larch for tuna.

"You know," said Nygaard. "They're getting better."

"Maybe," said Larch, "but I'm glad we skipped hors d'oeuvres. And I'm not sure I agree about Monet."

"What's not to agree? Who painted in a series before his cathedrals?"

"Rembrandt. All those self-portraits."

"All right, but that only confirms the hypothesis."

"But Rembrandt was before Darwin..." said Larch, picking his teeth.

"Not his fault. The impulse is the same. Artists must fully exploit the possibilities of a single motif by painting in a series, thanks to Monet; and must, over a period of years, show incremental evolution of particular artistic concerns, thanks to Darwin. Monet and Darwin fit hand in glove. Even Picasso, who sometimes painted in three different styles in a single day, is presented by historians in this developmental way -- and he is discussed in terms of periods. The glaciation of the blue period followed by the gradual warming of the rose and then the punctuated equilibrium of *Les demoiselles d'Avignon*. So to speak."

"So the predominating paradigm is a stage theory," Larch skeptically summarized. "Then where do you fit in the Pre-Raphaelites?"

"That's my point." Nygaard finished his second coffee. "Where do the Pre-Raphaelites fit? The brotherhood is treated apologetically as an aberration or as some kind of unfavorable mutation. Yet they are influential even now. Don't you think? I mean, art history tries to be scientific. Gardner, Gombich, Jansen; all have methodologies that... am I talking too much? Except for the cook... well, it's been days. No one's around."

Larch wiped his mouth with a paper napkin. Then he fished a cigarette from a crumpled pack and stuffed it in his mouth past the filter. "This is different from my days at the Slade," he said. "We worried about Cezanne's cubes and cones." When he lit up, the trace of a zephyr blew smoke toward Nygaard who pushed his plate, rose and said:

"Come on. I want to show you something."

He led the way to the ballroom. The incongruously physical rapture of afternoon light lowered Larch to the floor where he sat palms flat on the parquet and fingers spread to steady himself as he stared into the vault. After a little he said, "Priests and painters cheat and steal for light like this. Where's the choir? Should sing a gloria in excelsior or something."

"Disbanded for want of castrati."

Larch got up slowly and from habit dusted off the seat of his trousers. "You're using this for a studio?"

"Not exactly. Just a second." From the recital room Nygaard retrieved his sketchbook and handed it to Larch. "Have a look."

Larch thumbed carefully through page after page of gestures, hands, profiles and three-quarter views; lutes, flutes, sagbutts and tambourines; a schematic study reminiscent of Matisse's *Joie de vivre* melded with Picasso's *Salimbanques* and Dickinson's *Memories of Mother*; a loose leaf art deco illustration for *The Bremen Town Musicians*; a pair of flamingos with interlocking legs; frogs, angels, doves, goats, and glass spheres; page after page from the naturalistic to the abstracted in unsettling oscillation.

After some minutes, Larch said: "What has this to do with the portrait?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all," said Nygaard.

"What then?"

Nygaard raised his eyebrows, but did not reply.

"It looks like you can't make up your mind. There's no rhyme or reason."

"No style?"

Larch shrugged. "For lack of a better word, yeah; no style. No consistency."

"But that is the style," said Nygaard. "Synthetic. Eclectic."

"A crow picking up whatever glitters?"

Nygaard shook his head. "Don't care for Le Corbusier."

"So these drawings are what you've been doing here?"

"Not these," said Nygaard. "Others. These are fifteen years old. They're what I was thinking before I painted the one in Wet Willie."

Larch stuck a cigarette in his mouth but did not light it. "Wait a minute," he said, chewing on the filter. "I get it. You lost your way. Ha! A repressed *id* painted a bourgeois forearm."

"No," insisted Nygaard, shaking his head.

"Then what?"

"I don't know. But back then I never thought I would see light or walls like this. So I stopped thinking in a feudal... futile... way, that's all. Don't you have more than one side to your personality?"

"Sure. So what?"

"Well." Nygaard said this with finality. "Suppose you are, what? - right-brained but decide to pursue symbolic logic because you are really interested in symbolic logic for the very reason it is..."

"Oh, lord," said Larch. "Right brain, left brain, beggar man, thief. What does all this have to do with *Redivivus* and this jake-mixture of a sketchbook?"

"Both are me," said Nygaard flatly. "Just different aspects. Look; what were you taught at the Slade?"

"I told you. Cezanne. And Carravaggio. And they're worlds apart."

"Says who?"

Larch removed the cigarette from his mouth. "I suppose I do, don't I."

"Then you're in agreement with Gardner, Gombich, and Jansen. Fine. I'm not. But that does not mean we cannot have a beer together."

"That's a double negative," said Larch, putting the cigarette in a shirt pocket.

There were director's chairs out on the dock. They spent an afternoon telling tales and hoisting Heinekens until an alizarin lake sunset burst behind the cobalt striation of hills. The light fizzled, trees and bushes became dark masses, and a mysterious silhouette of Ving or Ping or Ding called them in for dinner.

8.

As early light sifted through the skylight, Nygaard began to begin by making a horizontal division and painting the uppermost a dull bluish gray. The lowermost he divided further and, painting each band according to its value, rendered the ground which he proceeded to name back, middle, and fore. To these same earthen hues, he mixed small amounts of spectral color, and formed a figure upon the ground. He stood back, unsure it was entirely satisfactory, but decided it would be less stark if there was another figure. So he placed a dove on the head of a monkey riding a goat.

-- o the chagrin of chagall...

He outlined figure after figure: some stood silently, two embraced, some turned away. One juggled balls of glass. To the side were functionaries, a line of jesters, their arms interlocked and legs crossing in an intricate dance played by a consort of flute, drum, concertina and harp...

-- and blind carolan's eleanor plunkett in the mother tongue...

By late morning, Larch had awakened and come into the ballroom carrying two mugs of fragrant coffee. He complained of a headache. Then his eyes focused on the wall, where Nygaard was beginning to apply muted color to the jesters.

"What the hell is this?" he asked.

"The colors of the Catalan court," replied Nygaard. "I'm underpainting in acrylic."

"Yeah, saves time. No, I mean what the hell is this?"

Nygaard stood back to look at the world he was making. "Art-cadia. A pastoral, however satiric."

Larch passed him a coffee mug, one with a portrait by Van Gogh. "You're nuts," he said, turning the cup so Nygaard could see Dr. Gachet.

"Friends, Romans, countrymen," said Nygaard in a mock toast.

"You'll get buried alive," said Larch. "I thought you said you were painting a frieze in the recital room..."

"I am," said Nygaard. "Only it will wrap around the wall, widen like a river, and connect with this... island."

"Floor to what? Twelve feet?"

"Ten."

"How far 'round?"

"From the north wall to the west, right at two hundred feet. I paced it off last night, after you crashed and burned."

"Hey. Have some respect for your elders."

Head tilted, Nygaard bent from the waist. "Yes, your bossness."

Larch harrumphed: "Some people's kids."

He walked slowly along the wall and touched it tentatively, to check the dryness of the paint. Then he fingered an assortment of house painting brushes in a coffee can. "I can't believe it," he said. "You always work this fast?"

Nygaard put down his mug. "I've been thinking about it for some time."

There was a moment's silence -- with Nygaard not knowing what Larch was thinking, and Larch not knowing what to say -- breached by a clear voice with the authority of an archangel. It gave both men a start.

"Arcadia?! Out of reach." It was Rosalva, who had been listening from the door of the recital room. She entered the ballroom boldly and said, "No way. Not even irony'll help."

"Where you been," said Nygaard. "This is William Larch, official guest and a past member of the brotherhood. Meet Rosalva, about whom I've told you nothing."

They shook hands. Rosalva then removed two cigarettes from a case and said to Larch: "Tom doesn't smoke, nor do the maids. Dr. Watson would deduce that you filled the ashtrays in my absence."

Nygaard laughed: "But of course he was dead wrong, for he had failed to read Holmes's monograph on tobacco ash."

"Yup," added Larch. "The butts were days old and too carefully arranged."

Rosalva feigned a wince and offered Larch the cigarette.

"Thanks. Don't mind if I do."

"And these on the wall must be the dancing men," she continued. "What *do* they signify, I wonder."

"Beware the Jabberwock," said Larch.

"No," said Rosalva. "Holmes and Alice are too Victorian. This is allegorical and faux renaissance. Early late-neo-medieval revival, perhaps?"

Larch said: "We could ask the artist."

-- or search Vasari...

"Useless," she insisted. "The contents of an author's mind are theoretically past anyone's reach. Why should an artist be any different?"

Larch took a deep draw on the cigarette between his yellowed index and thumb. "Are you sure what you're saying?" he asked.

"I might be unsure, all right, that you heard what I said," she replied.

Larch picked a small strand of tobacco from the tip of his tongue. "I see," he said. "That clears it up."

Nygaard said nothing as the conversation grew livelier. At one point, Rosalva labelled Larch's analysis "pre-Lacanian," as the debate moved from painting to literature to the analysis of character. How does Rembrandt paint searching portraits -- he had asked -- or an author produce different characters which we understand? Intelligibility is an illusion, Rosalva had countered. Characters are products of the imagination only: our responses, yours and mine; and these are not identical. Besides which, the system of language or style of brushwork mitigate against any direct knowledge of anyone. But *how* do you know that, Larch had asked.

"If what you say is true," he continued, "that the mind's content is unreachable, how can any author be credited with understanding the psychology of any character?"

"I don't credit authors with understanding anyone's mind," said Rosalva. "No more than I credit artists with achieving any exactness, for the idea must also be transmitted through the hand. Less so, then, from a painter. All we get is the semblance of the content of an author's mind. An author having more than one personality or facet of..."

"So Shakespeare is Caliban and Shylock... and they are the content of a particular psyche."

"Yes, in a manner of speaking. But Shakespeare's Caliban is not mine, which is different from yours."

"And how do you know that?" asked Larch again, bringing the discussion full circle.

"How do you *not* not know it?" asked Rosalva rhetorically.

-- contra-indications...

9.

Javier was leaning over a book, his cheek on his fist. Nygaard, who needed a respite from the recital room, had returned to the studio to gather supplies and to savor a cup of *kabushi-noh* while listening to him worry about everything. His observations began with Mikhail Gorbachev's wife, but then somehow segued to a discussion of Shay's Rebellion. Such cross-indexed brilliance was common among the thinkers of So-Bart, but Javier showed he was the unparalleled master as he moved on to "the management of crowds" during the late Roman Empire, when the number of holidays went from 65 to 135 under Marcus Aurelius. Eventually, each year there were 175 days spent at the amphitheater or the circus. Everyone went. Even the Persian invaders ended up at the games in Antioch.

"That's not what bothers me," sighed Javier. He turned his book to Nygaard, who saw the passage marked by heavy pencil. "Read this, why don't you."

Constantine was no longer represented as an incarnation of the sun-god, but his head was encircled by the "halo of the saint" (nimbus), and he was entitled "equal to the apostles" (*isapostolo*). Thereafter, all state functions, from military to finance, were designated "sacred."

"Let me guess," said Nygaard. "You're concerned over our current profaning of the state? Is that it? Or should we all stand at attention like good Nazis."

"What are you talking?" Javier turned the book around and pointed. "Not that part; this part... here, about the castes. Ocupaciones, everything, becomes hereditary, and the feudal is coming soon. This is after the end of republica, you understand, when the senate elects the emperor. Later, the collegio of cardinals elects the pope. Later, who picks the president... the collegio de electorales. That's who."

-- but still not girls prostituted boys sold and parents tortured to pay imposts of the most christian emperor so what matter whether the bastard fraud usurps or stands for election after all and besides adolph was elected...

In So-Bart, the line between inspiration and psychosis was a fine one. Javier was seldom in a lather, but as this day was obviously not one of his better days, Nygaard kept his thoughts to himself. Rather, he shook his head and sipped the cappuccino.

"How's business?" he asked.

"Terrible!" Javier laughed. "Couldn't be better. Hey! I forgot to mention. Two things. That lady from your gallery, what's her name? She came here last week and asked about you. She's nice, you know? And the other thing is, have you seen *Time* this week? The cover. You'll never guess."

Nygaard was uneasy at the mention of Karen. He had made no contact with her since she drove him to the cottage, and he was unsure if he felt guilty or lonely or simply a cad. "I haven't seen a newspaper for weeks. You know me, when I get painting seriously. No distractions. No television, no radio, no noise."

"Bah!" Javier had heard all this before, so he waved at Nygaard while calling through the door: "Chuay ao nang-seu time maa na Nute."

A disembodied hand, holding the rolled magazine, appeared in the doorway. Javier took it. "Gracias."

"Good morning, Nute, if that's you," said Nygaard.

She stuck out her head. "Arun-sawat," she said, and disappeared as Javier plopped the magazine on the table. There, on the cover, his face split by shadow and light, was a transparent Sanford Eliot on a bluish parchment background of the First Amendment.

"What?" said an incredulous Nygaard.

"It was in the socialist papers first," said Javier. "You know, you need to pay better attention to what's going on in this world. You haven't heard about this or Jerry Helmsman?"

"Nope," replied Nygaard flipping rapidly until he saw Eliot's face in a color spread which also showed Representative Rev. Helmsman addressing both houses of Congress.

"Tsk-tsk-tsk," Javier clicked his tongue.

Nygaard fixed upon a photograph of a styrofoam box emblazoned with McBottomline, but holding an amorphous brown mass, the entire ensemble encased in plexiglass. The work, it turned out, had been purchased recently by a museum in receipt of a record grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. It was entitled *Untitled*, and it was described as meta-ceptual -- a mixed media piece of styrofoam, wrapping paper, bits of lettuce, special sauce, and feces fished from a franchise's toilet bowl. The article quoted Eliot to the effect that *Untitled* was a protest against globalization and international capital. Representative Rev. Helmsman was incensed.

"The socialist papers had it first," Javier repeated. "*The Worker* says Helmsman owns beef cattle, too. In Mexico, no less -- so guess who's pushing for some free trade agreement."

"And guess who's buying the cattle, right?"

"Exactly," said Javier, gleefully. "What a country!"

"No," said Nygaard. "What a world."

Time was not the only magazine with Eliot on the cover. *Art In America* also did its part to drive up prices at Gallery Rumpman and elsewhere. Artists who had not the fare for travel to Washington picketed their local restaurants in lieu of encamping near the White House. In just over a week, depending upon one's perspective, Eliot had gone from obscurity to celebrity or notoriety. He was compared with Josef Beuys and Anselm Kiefer. Soon he was on Carson and Cavett and Geraldo. Even "Norm" Norman put Eliot on the air, while art historians and curators from the Metropolitan Museum debated on late-night PBS. In two weeks, on a Sunday evening, record Nielsen numbers watched as *60 Minutes* did an in-depth story on artistic freedom and Eliot's milieu, which was becoming a fable and a national joke: BFfd. This, in turn, turned the heads of speculators and developers who thought the So-Bart might be profitably extended past Danae Street. One plan called for Ffrench Circle to become a pedestrian mall with cutting-edge galleries and a McDonald's theme park. As for the art professors from the city university, they hustled GTAs and opened a space within a month, an occasion of the first magnitude.

The faculty's opening did not, however, work out as Nygaard expected.

Except for the odd but heated tryst and tumble with Rosalva, Nygaard painted steadily for days. The opening would bring comic relief, he thought, especially in the company of one who was otherwise in So-Bart only covertly. But Rosalva, untimely, had disappeared on assignment yet again. In one respect, this was grace in disguise, for he had given no thought to the possibility of encountering Karen that same evening -- and certainly none to Helena E.W. Fredric-Hutchins, who taught a short course in the history of Moslem art, and with whom he had a short, ineffectual fling the previous summer. When he did think of her, he recalled her as a caring, intelligent and attractive woman whose vulva stank. It was frustrating and off-putting, and had he known how to tell her, he would not have done; it was simply too personal. He distanced himself by degrees, his pretexts for being unavailable increasing gradually until she became painfully incommunicado, and they returned to their separate worlds. And had he thought of Karen in this context, he might have wondered whether something similar was happening, but for a different excuse. So he was fortunate, as it happened, to be attending the opening night alone; otherwise, he might have found himself standing with cocktail in hand,

civilly chatting with an intimate group that included three woman who had, in the past twelve months, spread their legs wide for him. The poetic possibility of their taking a powder together and comparing notes would have been appalling.

No worry, though; had he worried. This was not to be.

How different from Gallery Rumpman. There were gents in evening dress and women in elegant gowns, but also corduroy coats with elbow patches, peasant shirts and denim, leotards, tattooed ankles and toe rings, all mixing easily. The alternates, a few of them MFA candidates, were out in force. And there: yes, Nygaard thought he saw the concoction from weeks ago at the museum coffee shop; the woman decked in red and black like a *pousse l'amour*, only the effect was eerily enhanced because this night her brow was severely penciled and her red lips floated in the white powder of Noh theater.

-- approach avoidance masque of the red-&-black death everyone in costume revelers all and studied anglers from alien alternates to tenured boys in towers to monied boys on boards... diving masques all 'round the bathos-sphere unto the breach of the bitch dear friends, once more... fame 'n fortune, famine-urchin, rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief 'd lieber burn the light with thee than artsia fartsia bitch goddess in search of her own g-spot...

It happens that happenstance has betimes the look and feel of some implacably malign, mechanistic inevitability. Other times, it appears as a jocular yet mathematical synchrony. Or asymmetry, as when something ends as it began. It is not mere *déjà-vu*; it is too various. It might be a dream which comes to pass; or the thought of a face before one rounds a corner only to meet with it; or the ringing of the telephone upon a thought of the telephone ringing; or a letter which arrives the day after one wonders why a faithful correspondent has yet to write; or the insight that one is seeing a friend for the last time. More perversely, it is always what one sees but does not recognize, except in retrospect. Then comes the anguish of larger patterns and the immeasurable depth of a dimensionless turning point.

But, of course, Nygaard simply did not think this way. And just now, he really did not know what he was thinking, and he knew he did not know. Further, he saw no one he knew and, as usual, there were too many people for anyone to see the art. Besides which...

The concoction was again wearing sunglasses, even tonight, while looking at paintings and prints. How odd, that yes-Noh face, to be so carefully arranged. He thought he glimpsed a small microphone tucked in a purse, but the view was hampered by revolving constellations of glasses of pale champagne. He lost sight of the *pousse* and began to circulate. Ah, there: at the bar, the lovely Ann of Cleavage, bartrix at Rumpman's. So maybe it was the same cast of characters, the usual suspects. Where was her polemical professor?

"Tom?"

A voice behind. Karen's.

Nygaard turned to see her arm on that of the polemical professor's.

"Mr. Nygaard," he said civilly. "I think I owe you an apology. For last time, at Gallery Rumpman. Too much to drink, I'm afraid." He extended his free hand to clasp Nygaard's firmly.

"Can't recall," said Nygaard. "But I probably owe you one, too."

"Good!" said Karen. "Glad that's out of the way. Marty told me all about it, didn't you?"

The professor was sheepish. "Confession is good for the soul, I'm told."

"Entirely salubrious." Smiling broadly, Nygaard said: "Karen, you're exquisite."

"You do go on, dearest Tom," she said, in her best Scarlett O'Hara. "Hey, join us -- if we can find our way back through this throng. Howie's with L'Gardinier Riche. Yup, he's here, and he's seen your painting. So come on. He wants to meet you."

"Me?" Nygaard hesitated. "Why?"

"I tried to straighten him out," laughed the professor. "But he thinks you can paint."

Nygaard laughed. "I see. Maybe the three of us can convince him otherwise."

"You can count me out of it," said Karen.

"All right. Walk on."

"Hey," objected Karen. "Isn't that how drivers talk to horses on Masterpiece Theatre?"

"Then lead on," said Nygaard. He followed her following the professor windingly through the crowd, all the way admiring her short black skirt.

Again the center of attention, Riche was held captive by several earnest questioners. One in particular Nygaard knew as someone he had not seen in a year: an adjunct professor from the department of Middle Eastern studies. Dr. Fredric-Hutchins was wound in an ornate shawl and her hair was up. She seemed not to notice Rumpman, who was hanging on to her every word, nor did she acknowledge the fleeting eye contact when Nygaard approached.

"Ah," said Rumpman. "Here's our Tom." He introduced Riche to Nygaard.

"I saw your painting," said Riche.

"I read your book," lied Nygaard politely, shaking his hand.

"Then you must trade autographs," said Dr. Fredric-Hutchins, with no discernible malice.

Nygaard nodded and quietly said "Nice to see you again."

"And a small surprise," she replied. Then she looked at her watch to announce: "Oh, dear. I'm late, as usual. White Rabbit Syndrome. You must excuse me, but it was lovely meeting you Mr. Riche. I wish you all the best with your *Hokusai's Great Wave*. That was the title, wasn't it? I admire your writing so much." She shook his hand and departed.

In order to distract himself from relief at the sudden departure, Nygaard asked: "So what is this *Hokusai's Great Wave*?"

"A woodcut," Riche laughed, waving his hand as if to say don't ask. "Well, it's a book -- actually, a millstone around my neck. In its third rewrite. You don't want to know, believe me."

Riche immediately redirected the discussion by mentioning the painting at the museum. He felt that it was, in its juxtaposition of classical allusion and emotive brushwork, an altogether and unusually satisfying reconciliation of opposed tendencies, something he said his own writing strived to achieve.

"There's a mural I would like you to see, if you have time." Nygaard invited him to visit Moorland's cottage to see the work in progress. "Perhaps tomorrow, if you're free."

"Mural?" asked Rumpman, unsure he had heard correctly. Before he could pursue this line, the conversation shifted at length to Riche's growing notoriety and many recent troubles, including a scathing review he had received from one Yolanda Heine-Watanabe. Nygaard twice reiterated her name because it sounded simply too fantastic, and Karen's Professor Marty could not refrain from snorting as Rumpman explained that Nygaard, too, was one of Ms. Yolanda's victims.

"Can't top that," said the professor.

"You don't say?" chuckled Riche to Nygaard. "So you've been initiated."

"A real axe job, she did on Tom here," concluded Rumpman. "Whew!"

"The painting at the museum!" mused Riche. "Amazing. Well, never mind what some critic may think. Watanabe's a purveyor of neologisms. Frustrated and self-righteous."

"Those who can, do," observed Rumpman. "Those who can't, criticize."

"And their bloody pens should be cauterized," said Nygaard.

"Boys, boys, boys," said Karen. "We know how they will be!"

"I'll second that!" It was Rosalva, who came from nowhere. She pecked Riche on the cheek and said: "Sorry I'm late. But you know me." Then she saw Nygaard. "Oh! Tom..."

"Rosalva." Nygaard managed a faintly confused smile and perfunctory nod, and he could sense Karen shift uncomfortably as she cooed nearer the professor. Like a spectator at a tennis match, Rumpman was looking back and forth. What was the score?

Riche was delighted by Rosalva's sudden appearance and unaware of any tension. "Oh, you know each other, then?"

Of course, explained Rosalva, who said there had been so much to say when meeting him again after so many years that she had simply forgot to mention her sister Catherine's new house. To everyone else, especially Nygaard, she explained that she and Riche had known each other in Mexico.

"I was studying medicine, if you can believe it," said Riche. "Had some vague idea of becoming a doctor. And some vague idea of marrying this one. What happened, anyway?"

"Literature called?" offered Rosalva playfully. "Anyway, here we are..."

"How many years is it?"

"Let's don't count," insisted Rosalva as she turned to Rumpman and said: "I don't believe I've had the pleasure of making your acquaintance."

After Rumpman explained his connection through the gallery, he introduced Karen, who was reserved. (She had, in a par-second, caught the way Nygaard and this intrusive creature had caught each other's eyes.) Then everyone smiled cordially and sipped from champagne flutes.

The gallery was buzzing with a static-charged discussion of the NEA and Representative Helmsman. Eliot, Nygaard overheard, had been offered a teaching post with the university's art department. Rumpman heard some men in tuxedos bandy the idea of a dinner theatre in So-Bart. And there was a rumor, picked up by the professor who imparted it immediately to Karen, that a large independent bookseller would open a branch cum espresso bar that would be open, late, seven nights a week.

Someone re-engaged the group with small talk, and as Riche made an appointment to see the mural, Nygaard saw the fold of Rosalva's mouth unfurl.

"A toast!" boomed Rumpman, without making one.

There was a moment's hesitation. Then everyone smiled, raised their glasses, and sipped more champagne.

"Isn't this serendipitous," said Professor Marty.

"Cheers," said Karen.

10.

Nygaard retreated. He avoided the gallery. Most of all, he avoided Rosalva. This was not so difficult. She was away on assignment, or wherever it was she went when she went away.

At a bookstore he found two novels by Riche, a collection of short stories and a slender volume of special interest: a chapbook of poems entitled *Que' dia tan triste en Guadalajara*. The dustcover described Riche as a gypsy scholar who had studied at Oxford and Gottingen and graduated summa cum laude from medical school. Nygaard read several poems which put him in mind of Garcia-Lorca, including one lyric about wilted love gone sour, an odd image in an uneven quatrain with a fastidious acrostic spelling rose. The sales clerk, a tall, serious young man who had read all of Riche's published work, said that a play, *Night Fishing At Antibbe*, was on order. But what he liked best, he said, was a prose poem that had appeared only in a literary journal, *The Outre Other*, but he could not remember its title. The university library would have it, he said.

Sure enough, Nygaard found it there. But not in the stacks. Ms. Bar-trix, the delectable Ann of Cleavage, was reading at a table under a lamp. She had the journal. In her heavy reading glasses, Nygaard almost failed to recognize her, but as she feigned remembering him from Gallery Rumpman, he stopped to chat. It was then he saw Riche's name in 18-point bold.

"You're not reading *Outre Other*, are you?" He affected the tone of one beleaguered by an inexplicably implacable, inexorable force.

"Why, yes I am, as a matter of fact," she said.

"L'Gardinier Riche?"

"As it happens, yes again. I met him at a gallery opening two nights ago."

"Umh. I was there."

"You've met him, too?"

"Yes."

"So you're curious about his writing. Me, too. Strange man, don't you think?" she said. "I can't decide if he's brilliant or a great fraud."

"There's a difference?" asked Nygaard indifferently.

"Oh please!" said Ann, feigning exasperation. "Come... sit down. I'll show you. This is a prose poem, or at least it's described as... whatever it is. *'Feast of the Epicleti'*."

"Epicleti?" Nygaard took a chair alongside and leaned over the periodical, well-worn though published only the previous year.

"Just like Joyce's epiphanies, only different. Here, read this one. Number Two. I like it, but I can't say why. It's sort of free-association or stream of..."

"Oh. One of those. Yes, I understand," said Nygaard. He began to read:

Like love, a fever of red, red rose O rosebud (and rose chafer)
O rose thou art sick as my rose of the world, a rose-red city twice-old as time
arose in the rosarium rose window rose diamond rose cut a rose is a roserose rose madder rose
carmine rose campion rose lake

rosewater rose apple rosemary rose wood thou rose among violets by any other name, the name of the rose is a rose by name... est stat rosa pristina nomine... althea syriaca a heart of dark rose...

O rose-silver moon ere the last rose of summer
la vie en rose, mon Rose Selavy
la vie en Rose Selavy, c'est la vie

Nygaard knew only that Rose Selavy was a cross-dressing Marcel Duchamp. Beyond that, he did not understand the prose-poem, or whatever it purported to be.

"You like this?" he asked Ann, sliding the journal toward her.

She considered his question. "It's evocative," she said. "I think that's interesting. But one may need to read more than a short passage."

They talked about the opening. After seeing the professor with Karen, Nygaard was unsure that Ann's relation with him was what he had thought after Eliot's opening at Gallery Rumpman. He managed, none too deftly, to broach the subject.

"He's a dear man," said Ann, "but he works too hard and drinks too much, so I gave him a ride. He's my committee chair. God, I'd be sunk if something happened to him. And you; now I remember. You're the one who didn't return for his sherry."

Now Nygaard was impressed, for the opening had been a month ago. "You remember people by their drinks?"

"It's my job," Ann said. "Besides, some drinks are easier to remember than others and not everyone drinks sherry. You remembered my name, didn't you?"

-- thanks to a mnemonic device...

"... and you're the piper's son. Yes, I remember now. Tom, isn't it?"

When he responded by raising a perplexed eyebrow, she asked: "Would you like a cup of coffee? I met some people at the gallery opening; you know, the night before last at Uni-Prof's? It's kind of complicated. I mean, you may know more how things work in the art world than I do. Do you have time?"

"Why not. Where we going?"

"There's *The Skeller*. Or we could walk to *Javier's*. It's not too far. Do you know it?"

"I've never been to *The Skeller*," said Nygaard.

Ann closed the journal. "Then we're off."

The Skeller, its atmosphere dark, smoke-filled and virtual-Bavarian, was in the student center. They found a corner table with a small red lantern, its candle flickering. Nygaard had not been in such a place in nearly twenty years. He could not remember ever being as young a Goth as *The Skeller's* habitués, who eyed their intrusion with hostility.

"I'm sure they've been fed," Ann said, sensing his discomfiture. "And if they think anything at all, they'll think you're a prof putting the make on a grad student. Or vice versa. Want to try somewhere else?"

"This'll do."

Once the coffee arrived, they settled into a discussion of Ann's encounter with people she thought were from the museum, though they said they were collectors. Rumpman had introduced them, so maybe it was all right. They wanted her to attend an auction as their agent. This sort of procedure was often arranged for collectors who wished to remain anonymous. All she had to do was make bids until someone gave her a sign. She would not actually win the bid. By this means, explained the collectors, they hoped to avoid "buy-ins" by the auctioneers or the artists.

"It's no-brainer money," she said. "And there's tuition to pay, as always; but I'm not sure I know about buy-ins."

"Umh," acknowledged Nygaard. "It's a time-honored practice. Where's the auction?"

"New York," said Ann. "They'll fly me there, economy class unfortunately, and put me up at a Holiday Inn, which isn't too bad. And I get fifteen hundred in cash."

"That should tell you something," said Nygaard.

"That's why I'm asking you," she said.

Nygaard thought a moment. "Do you know who or what is on offer?"

"I found out some things," she said.

"Found out?"

"I kept pouring while they tried to impress me. Another time-honored practice."

Nygaard sipped his coffee and said: "It must be something... potentially big. And you're the shill for someone who wants to establish a market value. It sounds like someone already owns something that they intend to buy at auction."

"I don't follow."

"Sure you do," said Nygaard. "But you probably think a buy-in is just someone protecting against loss. You overlook speculators, say someone who buys a painting for five thousand and sells it for twenty-five. To himself. Sure, he has to pay a commission, say five to ten percent. But for an initial investment of seven or eight thousand, someone now owns something worth three times what he paid. That's where you come in, driving the price up where someone wants it. The auction house doesn't know you, so everything's all right. Next time it's on the block, it sells for real. Unless it's insured heavily against theft. That gets a little more complicated but..."

"I think I get the picture. Should I ask about tax write-offs for corporate collections?"

Nygaard, his mouth pursed, looked away.

Ann studied him carefully. "You enjoy all this, don't you."

"What? Knowing that no one has ever thought my work is worth a buy-in? Maybe. So what's going on the block?"

"Apparently the museum is selling some of its collection to raise money for acquisitions, so I think you may be wrong there," she said.

"Good. In that case, I don't mind."

"But someone also mentioned Sanford Eliot."

He chuckled sardonically. "Did they."

"Gee you wonder who," Ann laughed.

"Something like that."

They drank their coffees and looked around the canteen. When their eyes again met, Nygaard said: "So. You going?"

Ann weighed the question. "I could use the money. But, maybe not."

Nygaard looked at her, but none too closely. He had learned to be careful when asking: "Would you consider modelling? It may take more than two days to earn fifteen hundred, but I can guarantee you won't be flying economy."

11.

"Catalan court colors?" repeated Riche. He was finally here, after breaking two previous appointments. With hands clasped behind his back like a captain reviewing troops, he paced the length of the ballroom, back and forth along the wall, in an echoing cadence of hard heels upon hardwood.

Ann was undressing behind a screen in the recital room. After seeing the mural, she had declared everyone should pose at least once in a lifetime, only she would not take payment; the experience, she said, was the thing. Or so she explained to Riche who, by chance, she had arrived by appointment to find had come unexpectedly. He did not recall her from Uni-Prof's, but he was cordial, even friendly. Too many faces that night, he explained and asked to be forgiven. Now, she was nervous, but she thought it would not be too bad wearing a silk robe until he left.

"Catalan court colors," he repeated. "Explain. Please."

-- something that means nothing to anyone but one...

Nygaard, sitting astride a straight-back chair in the middle of the room, spoke hesitatingly as he gathered his thoughts: "When I was young..."

-- twelve maybe...

"...I was asked to repaint a drum..."

-- black conga encircled by arm-in-arm harlequins in dancing gherkin-green leggings and belled caps of pale terra rosa...

"...that had received rough treatment..."

-- revelers upraised arms round bonfires on a beach... recall pairs lying in shadows...

"...which the owner wanted repaired. But, when I was finished..."

-- yes, tommy it's colorful and nice and a fine job...

"I was told that..."

-- but now please tell why you changed...

"...the colors were wrong and that the original colors..."

-- no one told me...

"Were the colors of the Catalan court?" said Riche, who stopped pacing and pointed to the jesters. "These colors, then." He turned to face Nygaard.

"They're what I remember."

-- there's more to painting than...

"I was in Spain and Italy some years ago," said Riche. "By chance I met Charles Tsitrine. Crazy bastard. He'd gone through a messy divorce or a girlfriend, I don't remember, but he had decided to run with the bulls at Pamplona. Well, couldn't miss that; a chance to see a great writer end it all in a blaze of glory. Evenings we would get blasted together and he'd talk. You know, he seemed to know something about everything. Even the Catalan court. But he didn't say much about colors."

"Tsitrine," called Ann from behind the screen. "Didn't he write *Humboldt's Gift*?"

Riche shook his head no, then realized she could not see. "Saul Bellow."

Wrapped in the robe and barefoot, Ann came out from the recital room and sat down in a molded plastic chair at a small table across the ballroom. She pulled a tab to remove the cap on a bottle of mineral water, and filled a short glass. Waterfall. To her surprise, the sibilant sound filled the silence as the two men assayed the wall.

"Why these colors in Arcadia?" asked Riche.

"The drum's colors had symbolic value, I was told."

-- glimpse of a larger world... first time i realized there's more...

"So that was important?" said Ann uncertainly, still hearing the water-sound in the way one sees blue after staring at orange.

"There's more to painting than painting," said Nygaard elliptically. "I was just a kid. I didn't realize."

"So this, then," said Riche. "*A recurso*."

"What curse?" asked Ann.

"Curves in upon itself," ventured Nygaard. "Returns."

"Oh. I thought it was curse. *Curves*. How's that?" insisted Ann.

Riche shook his head. "I'm not sure what I meant," he said simply.

"What an epistemologist. Right there with Gide." It was Rosalva, whose tone implied a presence was making an entrance; which she did, with a flourish. She explained that Gide claimed not to know what he had written until someone explained it to him. "Le parte de dieu," she said sarcastically, then adding: "Mon dieu."

Another interruption. This was not what Nygaard wanted. He was hoping to continue an earlier conversation that Rosalva had derailed at Uni-Prof, where Riche had been discussing Balthus. Riche had begun with the proposition that the notorious *Guitar Lesson* might imply an attitude toward the decorative approach to painting. Of course it would, Rosalva had countered, if one could just ignore the pubescent girl's threatened vulva. But, replied Riche, the keys of the piano alternate in an odd sequence, and the black keys are the same length as the white. Rosalva then asked: What does this fact signify? And Riche replied: You tell me. Riche then asked Nygaard: Why is Balthus famous? Why was he singled out? Is there no probability that other artists were also painting similar subjects in a similar technique or style? Or were his pedigree and biography more interesting than those of other painters, thus making better copy? Rosalva answered: Perhaps. His mother knew Gide, and she was Rilke's lover. He was, after all, a displaced Polish aristocrat with, perhaps, a too rarefied and decadent proclivity that might permit a gratifying feeling of bourgeois moral superiority. To which Riche said: Or fuel some critical assessment of the artist as rebellious neo-Meternichian. Otherwise, what connections! His work hanged with the big boys: Picasso, Derain, and Miro. How did that come about? Balls-R-Us (Rosalva visibly cringed when he said this) had been firm in his anti-modernist stance and never part of any movement or group. Anti-modernism was a liability during the time when signing a manifesto was proof of one's relation to the cultural zeitgeist. Fatal, in art hysterical terms. And there the conversation ended in a dead stop.

Merde. And here she was again.

She was wearing black leotards and a light gray sweater, with sunglasses perched on her forehead. Nygaard felt a mild sensation of déjà-vu. Where had he seen this get-up? Not with Rumpman; of course not. He was beginning to see her as one who waits by doorways, listening patiently for someone to say or do something that will permit her to appear from the wings to maximum effect. Still uncomfortable watching her with Riche, who seemingly knew nothing. Nygaard regarded the brief liaison with Rosalva as an engagement under flares -- swallowing an orgasm, she once joked that Fellatio was her favorite character from *As You Like It* -- author! -- two ironclads which had hazily bumped bows in a confusion of charts; an aftermath not of celebration but cerebration; and, finally, faulty triangulation. But not to worry; only to regroup. Besides, he had a model wrapped in a robe, waiting at magnetic north.

-- waltz it up the compass rose... dick in, son...

Half-hearing, Nygaard had missed something.

"Dickson. Edwin Dickinson," Rosalva was saying. "Wouldn't you agree? It has the dreamlike quality of Dickinson."

"Don't know Dickinson," said Riche. "But I like it."

"Then never mind! Come on, luv..." Rosalva was saying to Riche. She kissed him on the jowl, took his arm, and guided him breezily out the door, like a dust devil that sucks up a piece of paper and carries it away.

Riche made a disoriented, Chaplinesque salute. "'Bye! Nice to meet you, Ann. Keep painting, Thomas."

"Ciao," said Rosalva.

As the duo departed, Ann asked: "Wasn't that Elana... what's her name? Idos?"

"Who," said Nygaard.

"That woman who just left."

"Her?"

"Yes. I talked with her at the gallery. You know, Eliot's opening. Dubonet with a twist, I remember. A writer."

"Rosalva?" Nygaard was confused. "No, you must mean someone else. Her name is Rosalva Alisebirac. Or that's her name in print anyway. It's actually Caribe y Sila."

"So then she is a writer."

"Freelances sometimes. She's finishing a doctorate. "

Ann shook her head. "I could swear we've met before."

Nygaard laughed. "She strikes me that way, too."

"And Riche is something else. He didn't recognize me at all."

Nygaard tried to be helpful. "Different context. You know how an association is made. Then you see someone somewhere else, and you don't know what to say. Even if you see them all the time. Maybe it's a clerk at the supermarket. You meet the clerk at a gas pump, outside the usual role... you know... clerk and customer."

"There's no script," said Ann.

"Rather silly talking about Fruit Loops while filling your tank."

The work went well. There was the usual dislocation at the beginning of the session, an inversion of the expected order: one dressed for the street yet vaguely vulnerable; another clothed confidently in dark and light. Then hair of orange highlights, swells of violet shadows and, at the nape, a stripe of pinkish sun with a nimbus of pale viridian. Then the calm face and selfless poetry of sheer concentration. Then an eye and a hand. Then the intimate space, suspended time, and quiet scratch of pastel on paper; the airiness and patience of an interior by Vermeer.

12.

After the session, Nygaard met Karen for a late lunch. She chose the bistro. He counted seven power suits walking in ahead of them, their cellular phones in hand. They came to a table covered by Cinzano umbrellas and stood around it, posing, striking attitudes, asking quotations, checking day-timers, texting. When they sat down, each blue suit and red necktie was talking to someone who was elsewhere.

Nygaard balked. "You come here often?"

A waiter approached.

"We'd like to sit away from... that," said Karen, motioning toward the umbrellas.

"You've got it," said the waiter, making a quick survey. "How about there, near the geraniums?"

A small round table was partially cordoned by large earthen pots.

"That'll do." The table was partly in sun, partly in shade. Karen ducked under an umbrella and the waiter helped her into a chair. Nygaard ordered gin and tonics and sat down, squinting in the sunlight. He loosed his cuffs and rolled his sleeves.

"How nice we could meet for lunch," said Karen. The lighter the touch, the heavier the irony. She had called him, saying she needed to talk business. "Long time no see."

Nygaard ignored the mild rebuff.

"Howie wants to see the portrait. He almost dropped in on you. This morning."

"Did he? I see."

"Do you? This is the second, no, third time I've had to..." She looked away.

"To what?"

Karen did not answer. Instead she said: "You have been painting, yes. But the portrait?"

"Some."

She nodded once, perfunctorily. "When can I take it?"

"Take it, why?"

She shook her head. "You want Howie to see the ballroom?"

The waiter reappeared with their drinks and took Karen's order of a small dinner salad without dressing. Nygaard was not hungry. "Nothing for me, thanks." The waiter remained composed but departed hurriedly.

They did not speak for what seemed an age. Karen studied Nygaard's face critically. At length she said: "What are you thinking?"

"You mean the wall?"

She shook her head again. "No. Whistler's Peacock Room."

"Not a bad analogy."

"Stuff it." She said this in a whisper as the waiter brought the salad.

"Will there be anything else?" he asked.

"No. Thank you." Karen managed a smile. "May I have the check."

Nygaard could hear her effort to be polite.

The waiter smiled in return, as if to say Okay, I'm intrusive... but it's my job. "Certainly."

After a moment she continued: "He would have come by now, only Eliot's going through the roof. He sold two to Hammer; have you heard? And the prices!"

"I heard something about an auction."

"Yeah well, let me tell you, that's another hap."

--be-dentured fortune smiles. "Then it went all right."

"I'll let Howie tell you... and gloat. He was at the auction."

-- shadow of a charade... shells sell sea shells... "Of course. Sanford's little helper."

"You're jealous of Sandy, that's all."

Karen sipped her gin and tonic. She did not touch the dinner salad. Nygaard stared into space, half-aware of the comings and goings across the street. Then he felt his hand patted from across the table.

"Hey, wake up. Do I get the portrait? Today would be good."

Nygaard turned to her, but it took some seconds before what she had said registered sufficiently for him to fumble for the key that he slapped decisively down on the table.

"Maids are off somewhere. This is the rear entrance. Leave it under the mat. The portrait's in the recital room, leaning against the piano."

Karen picked up the key, tucked it under the corner flap in her oversized wallet.

"Where you going?"

Nygaard shrugged. "Walk, I guess."

When the waiter brought the check, Karen handed him a crisp banknote and said there was no change, thank you.

She raised her glass, swirled the remainder, set it down. She stood, straightened her skirt, and smilingly said: "Illigiti non carborundum."

Nygaard said nothing, just watched her walk toward her impatiently waiting car, duck in, drive away. Down the boulevard, the red BMW stopped for a signal, then careened around a corner to disappear. Gone. He set out on his walk.

Before the bookstore at the corner of 10th and Gare St., he was handed a flyer for a new cookbook. Oh good, a book-signing. Thanks. It was an undifferentiated afternoon; hot, hazy; high clouds of humid gray-blue melding with glass and steel high-rises of blue-gray; huffing hubbub of tractor-trailers turning tight corners; receding planes of the hilly westward tinderbox; an aimless afternoon for an aimless walk. One need only proceed...

-- what could be better than to be here with a beer, after a little, or wherever instead... corner repository of rubbish on ruskin, consignments to oblivion... lilli palmer bio on the bargain bench... change lobsters and eleanora duse and sophia loren... but enough... tempus fugit... carpe diem... all that... so continue to continue...

He moistened a finger and held it to the air -- an intimation of southerliness; so he turned northward. Soon he was approaching Larch's neighborhood and thought, what the hell, why not see if the old buzzard is buzzing. He picked up the pace purposively.

The neighborhood was profoundly ugly, a wasteland of urine stains on unpainted walls -- so easy to imagine bursting bladders seeking relief against burnouts of weathered brick -- a home for the defeat of dreams. Larch called his studio, what was it, *le tour abolie*? thought Nygaard, as he approached its exhausted facade. A dim interior lamp permitted him to see the stooped figure through the door's grimy glass: Larch pushing his busboy cart down the row of easels. Nygaard rapped like the Raven. The old man halted, recognized the face peering through the glass, and gestured to turn the knob. It was locked. When Nygaard shrugged, the old man waved to wait-a-sec, wiped his hands and shuffled to the door. He opened it wide in greeting:

"We're never free until we do exactly that Nietzsche tells us to do."

Nygaard was lost. "And that's?"

Larch's cigarette flagged metronomically. "Where we left off last time. What's-her-name, Rose Solvent? The one who believes consciousness is a disease. A herd signal."

"Ah. Rosalva."

"Aye. She who knows we have no organ for knowledge. Been thinking about that..."

"But without knowing you're thinking it."

"Well, from one 'late born' squanderer to another, I think her boy Freddie can fold it seven times and insert it in Slot A. If he can find his fundament with both hands."

"Your expression of the will to power?"

"If you will. Come on in."

The air was stale with cigarette smoke. Larch seemed to know, and he left the door ajar. He pulled the fag from his mouth, tossed it to the floor and ground it under foot. He removed his bespotted apron, threw it over a chair and said:

"Haven't been out in three days. Forgot there's a semblance of air outside."

Nygaard saw the empty cans of beef stew around the hotplate on the work bench; then the row of easels with canvases all at the same stage of completion. Half looked to be mirror images, which he remarked.

"New technique," said Larch. "For me, at least. I load up paint on one canvas and press it against another. Saves time thinking what to do next."

Nygaard laughed as Larch pointed to the wall and a new sign in gold-lettered calligraphy:

Twice the thought and half the paint makes the picture. -- Walter T. Foster.

"Advice for rookies," he said. "Right-hand images go to Estes Park, left-hand images go to Taos. It's that or photo-offset lithography. Calendar stuff in limited editions of three hundred. Signed and numbered, with bullshit certificates of authentication. Now, what's that? Better do less than Doolittle, don't you think."

"There's always lost wax."

"What, bronze? Hate chasing."

"So hire someone."

"They always ruin the textures. Besides, I can't decide upon patinas. Especially anything that looks older than 1914. Year I was born."

"So polychrome. The Greeks painted everything. We're the ones who like white marble."

Larch's eyes gleamed. "That guy in L.A. Arab fella with oil money; bought the big house and painted the pudenda on the statues. He understood. Neighbors thought him gauche, though. Left-handed."

"Should have sent them on to Taos."

"You think?" Larch sat down on the gray divan near the book shelf. He ran his hand over the armrest, then cocked his head. Then, he seemed to be studying the cushions. Then, he looked at the row of easels. Then, he studied Nygaard. Then, he said: "It's time."

"Time?"

"Yes. Time for a genuine, sofa-sized painting."

An hour later they were drinking beer and waiting for gesso to dry on the cushions and armrests they had primed for painting. They were also admiring the first of a projected series: a blank canvas stamped in the lower right corner with a facsimile of Larch's signature cut from a potato. Nygaard then suggested proper rubber stamps be made for more prominent names, but they could not decide whom to exclude. So they returned to the sofa and began to paint into the damp ground. Each cushion and panel was treated like black velvet, and soon there were images of Elvis, a snarling tiger, a gaudy island sunset, a grizzled cowboy, and a bare-chested Indian

maid with war-painted nipples. Ideas were a dime a dozen. Nygaard wanted the sofa hung from the wall, just like any other sofa-sized painting. Yeah, why not -- and he began to discuss a formal exhibition.

Not in the mood to be serious, Larch interrupted: "Couple days ago I had visitors. From Taos, as it happens. Wanted to visit the artist's studio, you know, on the way somewhere. Nice enough people; retired couple with an RV, seeing the country. Then the guy starts talking about Roswell and how humans have to adapt to their environment, whereas other animals do just fine. Now why is that, he asked. The answer? We come from another planet; Earth is not our home. Then he starts to discuss art. And color perception. He says: 'Suppose we don't see the same color; we just use the same name, and we both see something when we use this name, and we both mean something definite, and agree that that's it whenever the name is used but -- and here's where his eyes got really sincere -- maybe it's not the same thing at all, just the same name we attach to different colors.' Like he's the first person ever to have this particular thought. And he kept asking if I understood what he was saying. If I could follow it. Know what I mean?"

"I think I can follow it."

"Exactly. So what does this tell you?"

"I give up."

Larch lit a cigarette. "Somebody's already hung your show somewhere, laddie."

They painted into the evening and on into the night, until Larch's eyes could no longer focus and he slumped in the swivel chair at the roll-top. But he seemed satisfied and began to joke how to plan for a starving artists' liquidation sale, one day only, nothing over thirty-nine-ninety-five. Truckloads of art in the parking lot of the Holiday Inn. I'll drink to that, said Nygaard. And they did.

Many bottles later, he returned by taxi to flip the switch in the recital room. It provided just light enough to see the wall in the ballroom. A stern assessment, he thought, was in order -- and he would have been unsparing except he saw something on the floor, and a small candle flickering from a saucer beside it. No, it was not something, but someone rolled in a blanket and fast asleep. Ving or Ting or Ching had returned; but what was she doing on the floor. He turned off the light and tiptoed over to blow out the candle. When he knelt to pick up the saucer, his heart missed a beat. It was not Ching or Ting or Ving; it was Karen.

He pulled a strand of hair from the corner of her mouth, and brushed it back with a single finger. Then he extinguished the light, and he sat in the dark beside her for a long while.

13.

Karen awoke by degrees as the paraclete of morning light gathered itself to descend softly from the vault upon the figures on the wall. She had sat with them the night before, had allowed herself to engage their expressions and gestures until scrutiny was suspended in favor of a flight into the immediate, intimate relations of this private world; the mundane fact of its being only a painting having fallen away, forgotten. Once returned from the reverie, she had decided it would be impossible to write anything unless she spoke with the artist. And then, of course, he

would come to know that she was writing a piece for the Sunday supplement he so often distained. But it seemed to be necessary.

Her strange mood had led her to wait for him; and when, after eleven, he was still not returned, she had begun to wander in the empty house, moving slowly from room to room, like an explorer on a wide, unknown shore, looking for something without a name. She read the labels on bottles of spice in the kitchen, opened and closed the broom closet's door, ran her finger across spines of books in the study, jangled wind-chimes in a modest atrium, and checked the viscosity of shampoos in a bathroom. She stared at herself in the mirror and turned three-quarters until the cruel light snagged the faint demarcations of what she knew would soon be crow's feet. Then, she had climbed the spiral stair to the observatory and peered through the telescope trained on a small section of scintillate sky. A sense of scale, she thought. Absolutely essential.

Then it seemed not to matter what he would think about her writing for the supplement. Nor did it matter that she had stayed too long, alone in the house. She had not wanted to drive back to her apartment, with its buzzer-and-deadbolt security. A pillow had become all that was needed. In a bedroom on the second floor, she found a small round one, covered in corduroy, on a love seat near a desk strewn with papers. The bed was in disarray and covered with clothing. This, she knew, must be where Thomas had made love to Rosalva. Unless he had poured sherry for her, too, at his studio. Or out in the guest house. Yes, there. She knew he had done it, and she knew what she knew. But that, too, seemed not to matter. She had coolly examined a lacy brassiere, then picked up a pair of leotards from which she plucked a long, loose black string and tossed back upon the bed, over some rumpled red socks. Artifacts. Evidence. Whatever. It just did not matter. She had carried the pillow, together with a light blanket, down to the ballroom where she had lit a small, stout candle centered on a saucer. Then she stretched out upon the hardwood, rolled herself in the blanket under the dark skylight, and watched the yawning stars until she lapsed into a dream.

Now the ballroom was quiet and ethereal. The light had waken her, slowly, and she was unsure. Was it Saturday -- or was last night Friday night? No, Thursday. This is Friday. Two more to go until Monday, her free day. No, three; counting today. And she was here, not home. Crazy. What had she been thinking? Must get up; get ready for whatever comes.

Her hip felt sore as she carried the blanket and pillow back upstairs. She tossed the pillow on the love seat and folded the blanket, before replacing it on the closet shelf. So many clothes on so many hangers, and not enough room. Had she designed the house, the closets would all be walk-ins. She glanced out a window across the expanse of lawn to the guest house, but saw no signs of life. Then she began to pull closed the folding doors when something caught her eye: a red and black pullover in a plastic bag, pinned with a receipt. *Elana Idos*, it read. She thought it odd, and the name gnawed her recollection, but she could not place it. Nor could she imagine what it might be doing here in this particular closet, unless it was some misplaced belonging of a new maid. But Rosalva was not here, and Thomas would not be hiring. Nor would he be firing, even though Ning or Ming or Wing were away somewhere and he had no idea when they might be returning.

She took a shower and shampooed with an extract from soap nut trees, a selection based upon aroma after she uncapped and sniffed several other unknown varieties no doubt from the shampoo cellar with its nice, neat racks and controlled temperature. But don't be silly, she told

herself. She towed off, dressed quickly and brushed her hair. After using a toothbrush, she washed the bristles in hand-soap and stood it on end in a glass. Then she made a decision: just a touch of lipstick, no mascara, today. Enough is enough.

She bounced downstairs to the kitchen to heat water for coffee. In a cupboard she found a jar of Italian instant and a cylinder of bamboo, with a bright red ribbon, containing Chinese tea. There was half-&-half in the refrigerator, brie wrapped in foil, and brownish vegetables in a lower bin. A plastic bag held two heels of wheat bread. No toast; she did not want the mint jelly meant to garnish lamb. Checking the date, she opened the carton and poured half-&-half into a mug and added a heaping teaspoon of instant coffee. It looked darker and smelled stronger than usual, so she read the label to find it was espresso.

She poured steaming water into the mug and stirred. When she brought the mug to her lips, she saw the reproduction on its side: a print from *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji*. A print of a print? No; too early for thinking like that. She took another sip of simulated *kabushi-noh*, and saw the rainbow cast on the kitchen wall by light refracted from a glass prism in the window. She had noticed prisms in windows in other rooms, too; otherwise, nothing hanging anywhere except in the study. Nygaard's portrait of Catherine would be the house's only painting. Except for the mural in the ballroom, of course. Rumpman still did not know. Fortunately, he had been satisfied with what was so far accomplished, although he felt the portrait could be further along. A small complaint. Basically, he was pleased that the recalcitrant Thomas had submitted to necessity, and that soon advances would be recovered. Everyone, he had said to her over dinner, pulls off their pants one leg at a time. "Puts on," he had corrected himself in embarrassment. He was ebullient over Eliot's rising star, but became too frank in discussing his separation from Natalie and their two kids. Now, even the lawyers were happy: his divorce was going through, the house was about to sell, and a final settlement had been agreed. Next were intimations, and she had the impression he was fishing -- or maybe just drunk and confused. She preferred to think the latter. Within an hour, she excused herself to come here, return the portrait, and sleep on the floor of the ballroom. What a long night.

A photographer. Perhaps she could get one here when Nygaard was away. She could copy the key he gave her. Of course, she would hold back the photographs; no one would know any more about them than about the article she was writing. Ah! She had almost forgot. This morning she had to take copy to the *Gazetteer-Herald* -- an advertisement for the extension of Eliot's show, by popular demand, at the gallery. Also, a freelancer had been enlisted, and advance copy of a review of Eliot's work was favorable. It paid, as they say, to advertise.

As she stood at the sink, washing the mug, she heard a door open and close and long strides coming toward the kitchen. She knew the gait, so she was not surprised when Nygaard appeared in the doorway.

"I wondered where you were," she said. "I brought back the portrait."

"Thanks," Nygaard nodded. "Sleep well?"

"Hip's a little sore, but other than that..." She wiped her hands dry with a towel under the sink. "See? I can bend. So no complaints."

Nygaard looked down at the floor, to let a discrete interval pass. "Did he say anything about it?"

"You mean Howie?"

"Yes."

"Yeah, he did. He said there's a little something..."

"Wrong with the mouth?"

"Just teasing. Commissioned portrait, you know. No line like one of Jimmy Whistler's."

"Then he didn't say it."

"No. He likes it. But he thinks it could be further along. You know how he is."

"That's why I call him Howie-Zowie."

"Tommy, Tommy, Tommy."

"Hey..."

Karen thought a moment, then said: "I noticed the candle didn't burn all the way down. Last night. Did you blow it out?"

Nygaard looked away. The candle was one thing, but he did not want her to know he had been sitting on the floor, watching her sleep.

"Nevermind," she said. "Say, do you know someone -- an Elana? Elana something."

Nygaard remembered the previous morning, when he was drawing Ann who had asked the same question. "Can't say I do. Why?"

"Just curious. I put a blanket away, in an upstairs closet. There was some dry cleaning, that's all." She gathered her purse, opened the clasp.

"You've lost me," Nygaard frowned.

"A name on a receipt. Here, I've got to run." She handed him the key and said:

"Thought about making a copy." With intentional punctuation, she clicked shut the clasp. Then silence.

He leaned back against the counter, looked down at the floor, and bit his lower lip. She knew he was waiting for her to leave and would say nothing. What an asshole, she thought; but instead she said "The wall is wonderful. 'Bye."

To her surprise, he looked up and said: "You mean that?"

"Yeah. I mean that. It's worth ten of whatever's in the Wettin-Willis."

"No," he said. "I meant about the key."

Karen left without answering and, as soon as she was gone, Nygaard climbed the stairs to have a look at the dry cleaning in the closet. He could have entered any of four bedrooms, but he looked first for the one he immediately suspected -- a room he had not, strangely enough, entered before. It was the second door he tried, and he knew it was her room because of the writing desk and unmade bed -- and the scent from a bottle of roseate perfume on the nightstand; something she dabbed behind her ear and between her perfectly symmetrical breasts.

So this is how it feels to be a prowler, he thought, walking catlike across the carpet to the folding doors. Ludicrous, really -- to be alone in a big house and afraid to make a sound. Still, he drew open the doors carefully, methodically, almost -- he snickered -- para-professionally, and saw the red garment hanging dead-center, probably where Karen had left it. He next noticed the folded blanket on the overhead shelf and momentarily avoided the so obviously yellow paper pinned to the plastic bag. When he shifted his attention, his first thought was that he would like to skewer it on the crook -- impale it. Burn it, for it read *Elana Idos*. Not that he had any cause to be angry with anyone over a name he did not know -- just the mounting suspicion that he was even more stupid than what he had been thinking he might be.

He closed the closet and stood staring at the writing desk, but not until the unfocused exasperation passed did he think of rifling through its drawers. The shallow pen drawer was full

of pencils and erasers and white-out and paper clips, a few gummed labels and an assortment of postage stamps. The two deep left-hand drawers had files neatly alphabetized but mostly empty, save for a few random notes on odd bits of paper. The three right-hand drawers had various style manuals, a packet of razor blades, a bottle of ibuprofen, a large hand mirror, and a small vial of what looked like cocaine. Otherwise, there were scarves, two pairs of pumps, a squash blossom necklace, and an old army belt. And a manuscript. He pulled it out from under the pumps and read the cover page: "*Syntagmatic Markers in the Prose-Poetry of L'Gardinier Riche*" -- a dog-eared paper submitted to a seminar during Spring Term. He replaced it under the shoes, closed the drawer and began to sort the pile of papers on the large desk calendar pad, most of which appeared to be related to Rosalva's dissertation, research and analysis of the relationship between what she had called the art establishment and the alternates. Because she had once barbed him about being in the Wettin-Willis Collection, he searched for an index. Instead he found another manuscript, stapled, and then another. The first was by the critic Matthew Quintal, and it too was concerned with an article that had been written by Riche; the lately much-discussed review of Riche's notorious "*The Holy Roman Empire's Third Reich*" published in *Rolling Stone*. The latter was by E. Idos -- an untitled essay-in-progress, or so it seemed, because the last page ended in mid-sentence. He began to read:.

Cleanth Brooks has proposed that "it is the scientist whose truth requires a language purged of every trace of paradox"; yet, equivocation and ambiguity drive T.E. Hulme to assert "so much has romanticism debauched us, that, without some form of vagueness, we deny the highest. "These opposed claims, these different ends of romanticism and classicism, are the eyes of the maelstrom that is *Hokusai's Great Wave*.

-- quintal's manuscript maybe she knows him but what would someone who is not e. idos be doing with... knows them both perhaps... or pen names one of the pen names or maybe both a possibility or neither can't be no probability... then both. shit.

He began to feel uneasy. Even queasy.

15.

Meanwhile, a white horse is not a horse.

Javier was sitting with his head in his hands, thumbs buried in cheeks and straight, thick fingers massaging his temples. His elbows were holding down the corners of a book of Mohist dialogues, and he was worrying how, or worse, why, such agonized word-twisting had entered the world. The crux of his consternation was an argument that if one asks for a horse, a white or black or purple horse might be supplied. But if one asks for a white horse, a black or purple horse would not do. This is because 'x is distinguishable from y' leads to 'y is not x'. After all, color and shape are different, and their combination is something else again. So it followed a white horse is not a horse, for the Sophist in the dialogue. But the Mohist objected by saying

that asking for a horse is, yes, not asking for a white horse, but a white horse is a horse nonetheless. That seemed to work. But so did the following argument, which understood horse to mean horseness. Given that, white horse was taken to mean white-horseness, and this was immediately followed by the Platonic proposition that different abstractions are different entities -- that is, the terms defined a non-identity or difference.

Philosophically a pluralist, Javier patiently considered the two arguments. It might be possible, he concluded, that these two entities were the same thing, only different. The synthesis, however, left him uneasy.

On an adjacent chair, he spied a slick stock arts journal left by someone who had sat two hours with a single cup of house coffee and a pack of cigarettes. Javier picked up the journal and absentmindedly turned pages until confronted by a stark photograph of a man whose head was bandaged. The caption said he was a performance artist whose medium was the overt and covert exploitation of the body as a means to liberation from the late-capitalist commodification of art. Socialist sensibilities piqued, Javier began to scan the review in which a breathless critic enthused over the absolute unmarketability and purity of the performance at some New York cooperative gallery. So-Ho no es So-Bart, he said aloud and glanced reflexively at the byline: Yolanda Heine-Watanabe.

The performance was a collaborative project, for a team of photographers supplied documentation through still photographs and videotape as the artist ritually severed his ear with an especially sharpened Artysaurus palette knife, its trademark visible in an inset photo.

Then a stand-by physician, a member of the museum board, wrapped the artist's head and placed the ear in a refrigerated container for transport to an emergency ward where it was reattached using grant money. Before leaving for surgery, the artist cited inspiration from Chris Burden's self-inflicted gunshot wound. Other influences included the photographer Cindy Sherman and critic Lucy Lippard. In a Lacanian interpretation of this by-invitation opening-night, the reviewer theorized that an ear was, perhaps, the last thing the artist had seen before discovery that his mother had no penis. The article closed in noting that documentation would be installed in time for a public opening of the show the following weekend, at which time negatives would be destroyed and the artist would erase his signature from a limited number of black and white prints.

Javier turned to the book review pages and found a collection of essays on pornography and the violation of taboos discussed in terms of coding and context; the debasement of high art into kitsch for the urbanized masses of late capitalist society; an account of the Times Square Show; a memoir of the break-in on the trustees' dinner at the Metropolitan Museum, as performed by the Art Worker's Coalition; an assessment of retro-chic; a history of modernist esthetics from the significant form of Fry and Bell to the formalism of Greenberg -- which the reviewer thought especially poignant in that the formal separateness of the aesthetic from the rest of life was to be more populist, requiring no extensive classical education. Formal principles, once adopted and internalized by the public, could only open wide the doors to apprehension. Javier could not help smiling. Understanding and anxiety; the same thing, only different.

Meanwhile, Nygaard had returned to the museum and was standing patiently by the coat rack in the coffee shop as the floor manager searched the kitchen for Elana. The red and black pullover in the closet; the black leotards and red socks on Rosalva's bed; these things had led to the oddest intuition. For just as he never forgot a good painting, he never forgot an interesting

face: the *pousse l'amour*; that layered concoction in black and red, that other morning when he had come here to sit among the glass tables and private conversations. How his perception had changed in such a small space: he no longer associated that day with *Redivivus*. Then there had been Rosalva in the ballroom. How she was dressed. He should have put two and two together: the gray sweater, the black leotards, the dark glasses. How stupid he had been. Maybe still was. For if he were right, and Elana Idos came trotting out and was really Rosalva Caribe y Sila or Rose Alisebirac... then what.

-- est stat rosa pristina nomine... thou rose among violets by other names of the rose is a rose by other names... something like *riche* wrote...

The manager reappeared from the kitchen. "Sore throat and fever. She didn't come in."

-- fever... sore throat... feigned maybe... bet it sounded hoarse... but you're losing it... covertspiracycrapola..

Relieved at not having to face the face that might have faced him, he thanked the woman and departed for Javier's and a much-needed cup of *kabushi-noh*.

Meanwhile, the *Arts & Entertainment* editor at the *Gazetteer-Herald* was obsessing enviously how a freelance critic (for Christ's sake) could be so liquidly fortunate to afford the hire of any assistant. Much less this one. Lucky bastard. Why couldn't he get a break just once? For a change. So fuck Matthew Quintal and the horse he rode in on. Some ride, to stay in that saddle. Probably brings coffee too, unlike the libbers in the office. This one could sharpen his blue pencil anytime.

"Well..." she said indecisively, while knowingly shifting weight from one high heel to the other, well aware the furtive eyes behind the desk were judging conformation every time she took a breath.

"Sorry," said the editor. "Thought it would be here by now."

He drummed the eraser end of a pencil, tossed it on some papers, then looked directly at her -- practiced and smug.

She looked away in faint displeasure, but also to allow the jerk a chance to imagine what he would never have an opportunity to realize. She said:

"I can come back. This afternoon."

"You want me to call?" Reflexively, the editor worried he was being too obviously subtle while angling for a mobile number. As a diversionary tactic, he added: "Save a trip for nothing."

She smiled and pulled his pen from its cheap plastic sheath. Suggestively? He could not be certain. But then she hesitated, reconsidered, returned it to its clumsy block.

"No biggie. I'll check again later."

"Fine." Cinematically cool, he pushed easily back in his chair to watch her canter away. What did he care? His was still the upper hand.

Meanwhile, Karen was entering the sliding doors at the reception desk. She carried an envelope with a black and white glossy of Sanford Eliot and a double-spaced draft she had written for an advert in the upcoming Sunday supplement. Everything was decided except the

typeface. She carried also the corrected copy of Quintal's highly favorable review of Eliot's show at Gallery Rumpman, now at the end of a good run. Too much on her mind, she bumped against an exiting body.

"Oops."

"Sorry."

"It's... I mean, hi."

The injured party, more surprised than anything, made a rapid recovery. "Well... hello! Karen? From Gallery Rumpman. Yes. We met at Uni-Prof's. You were with..."

"How nice of you to recall whoever he was." Oh that's better, Karen scolded herself. Ha-ha, how amusing.

A polite laugh, followed by an uncomfortable silence. "What brings you here?"

Karen had an answer for that one. "Have to drop these off." She gestured with the file and envelope. "Eliot show. And you?"

Rosalva strained to appear disinterested, even though what she wanted was annoyingly right there before her. "Lunch date," she said. "Came to see a friend. But he's tied up."

"Lunch." Karen nodded, as if to say 'what a great good idea.' How lame. Nothing worse than nothing to say, while feeling some strange compulsion to be friendly. Except groping for words and grasping onto the wrong ones. She might have said 'nice running into you,' laughed, and left it at that. But no. Before she could stop herself, she said: "So tell me, how's your famous writer?"

Meanwhile, a curious postcard was being mailed from the other side of the Atlantic, one that had been carefully chosen at a small gift shop fronting a small church in a small town in the Tuscan hills. Catherine Moorland had felt a special affinity for the reproductions of the portrait at the ducal palace in Mantua, so much that she purchased three of them. Pisanello had captured something, she thought; it was so easy to imagine this concentrated face leaning over a keyboard, lost in Scarlatti. One card she intended to keep, another she sent to Mr. H.A. Rumpman, and the third she carefully wrote to appear high-spirited and spontaneous:

Dear Rose, the experience of art is like increate nature; valid on its own terms! And the reality of Michelangelo -- I want a ceiling fresco! Or maybe white horses. Just rode through a vineyard, followed by a wine tasting. Love this Pisanello, huh? Can't wait to see the portrait. Maybe soon. Ciao! xxxooo Cat

16.

The aestival juleps of July were now forgot. The breezy days of summer had long listed into an intolerable swelter of late-August brownouts, as dessicated cicadas competed feverishly with the infernal hum of air conditioners that brought no relief in the late innings. Changing channels impatiently from baseball to the swimming trials only made matters worse. And virtually no one watched the triathletes in Hawaii; those overheated runners straining past

volcanic rock. Instead, the local culturati began opting for the museum in record numbers, to assess a small selection of Robert Henri's classroom demonstrations in 72-degree comfort.

So it was that H. Augustus Rumpman decided to seize the moment. Cocktails on the lawn. In the late afternoon, say five-ish, by the lake at Moorland's -- hors-d'oeuvres, champagne, croquet, and a swim. R.S.V.P., if you please. After Karen failed to dissuade him, she convinced him at length to drop "if you please" -- then, to dispense with invitations altogether, to keep it simple, and not to invite every *Name* on the gallery's mailing list.

"Naturally," said Rumpman. "We need to be selective."

So that Friday, on portable tables covered with linen, Karen arranged cheese platters and cold beer, both conducive to bonhomie on a late afternoon when power ties are loosened after a long week of meetings and memoranda. For those who might stay late into the evening, she also arranged for catered omelettes, croissants, and coffee from *Javier's*.

One of the first arrivals was a casually attired broker escorting a big-breasted bombshell blonde in a skin-tight fit reading *Been There, Done That, Bought the Tee Shirt*. For some time, Javier had been pondering this message from an unobtrusive distance, wondering where she had gone and what she had done. At this moment, he was beginning to think, the old placards and posters of the proletariat were being supplanted by tee shirts. Or bumper stickers like one Nute had seen slapped on a red Mustang convertible trailing the semi-circle of BMWs parked in the drive. It read: *Question Authority*. Okay, he had said defiantly. Says who? But as soon as he asked this, Nute pointed out he was doing exactly what the bumper sticker told him to do. Now don't you feel silly? she asked. Jesus, Maria y Jose, he had said. What a condom. No, said Nute, what a *condition*. Then Karen, helping them carry cheese platters from their station wagon to the waterside, had asked if the word was *conundrum*. She then said the one that irked her most was the self-referential *Bumper Sticker*. When Nute said she hated *My Wife, YES; My Dog, MAYBE; My Gun, NEVER*, Javier said that what he did not understand was the sticker reading *One Way*. That's for Baptists, said Karen. Javi's Catolico; I'm kinda Buddha, said Nute. It's all the same, Javier said with certainty. It's all opium. Tsk, said Nute.

Meanwhile, people trickled in. The recently returned Ting, Ming, and Ding diverted the meandering guests through the house and out to the lawn and a spirited volleyball game in which sweaty *Been There Done That's* spikes were set up by the ogling opposition. Others sat on deck chairs out on the dock. And out on the water, alongside the sailboat, a couple conversed casually, their arms hooked over the side, white wine in hand.

Rumpman was moving from group to group, playing host in the relentless heat. He wiped his brow with a handkerchief, then quaffed beer from a glass stein. It was going well, he thought; even if Nygaard had been perturbed by what he called an unwarranted intrusion. As if he were the liege in this particular manor, instead of an upstart-over-the-top ego who now knows who holds the lien. Still, it chafed Rumpman that his painter refused to show him the completed portrait, or to let him see the frieze in the piano room. Obviously, someone had seen *The Agony and The Ecstasy* one time too many.

Artists. Always above it all, while he had a spouse, two daughters, a dog and a mortgage. And a rapprochement after a trial separation, the lawyers and their seconds resting for now in opposite corners. Himself a mediocrity? No one ever said this to his face, but he was nobody's

fool. They thought it, all right. But what did anyone really know about him, anyway? What could they tell? From Natalie's face, that the novelty had worn off after fifteen years. Or maybe that was inferred when she stopped working at the gallery. Granted, she had been the art major. But he was a fast study and had read Jansen's *History of Art* over a long weekend. Then, no problem leaving the glassy showroom where he had slaved ten years because, at the end of the day, one sales commission is like any other. But her departure too closely coincided with certain necessary changes that put the gallery on a more business-like footing. A change in the tax year -- and face it, *Natalie's* had not the ring of *Gallery Rumpman*. He had been right about that. But her departure had also led to the hire of Karen, whom some suspected he was diddling. Not that he minded the suspicion. And the house? The tree in the front yard was seven years old now, while last year he was able to get free of the adjustable rate. That was an accomplishment. And he liked the ranch style, with its neat hedges and chain link fence for "the wiener dog," as Lucinda called his dachshund. Apple of his eye, Lucinda. She used to throw a ball, and Doc would chase after it. Now, Doc could only waddle. And Lucinda? She had grown much too fast and taken to grunge, which he understood to be something out of Seattle having to do with music, dress, and attitude. And the other one? God only knows what she's about. Another story. So okay; not everything was perfect, but whose world is? But it was he, the middle-class, up to his haunches in monthly installments, who made modern art possible. What's so mediocre about that? His tax dollars at work. And artists? Feeders at the public trough. Then they look the gift horse in the mouth. Lack of appreciation. Ah, there... L'Gardinier Riche has come after all.

Rumpman strode briskly across the lawn to greet the writer. "It's great you could make it. You remember me, of course. Augie, from the gallery."

"Yes, yes. Rumpman," said Riche, who was shielding his eyes against the low sun's raking light and guiding another gentleman by the arm. "Let me introduce a sometime antagonist. This is Ed Dunraven."

"Lee's former editor," said Dunraven, with unbuttoned formality. Uh-huh, a veteran of the after-five martini wars, thought Rumpman.

"And nowadays the only one who calls me Lee," said Riche. "Ed's recently moved to Ark Press and, god bless him, now has responsibility for ruining manuscripts over there. But at least he's off my back. Before that, he was making my life miserable at *Outre Other*."

Dunraven smiled knowingly, raised an eyebrow and extended an elegant hand, its rings glinting with late sun, a screaming-red orange dropping behind the hills.

"Glad you can join us," said Rumpman, clasping him firmly; a handshake to hide he had no idea what Riche was saying.

"Quite a place," said Dunraven, looking about. "And quite a turnout."

"How 'bout a beer?"

"Two might be better," said Riche.

Rumpman stopped to make the computation. "Right. Oh, yes. Of course." He held high his stein, pointed at it, then waved two fingers to Karen. Biergarten Code International.

"Ed was just admiring the blonde," chided Riche. "Over there, playing volleyball."

"Ed and everyone else, eh?" said Rumpman.

Dunraven laughed. "Don't know where she's been or what she did there, but I'm pleased she bought the shirt."

"And grateful to god they didn't have her size," quipped Riche. "That, too. But say, just wondering. Is Rosalva around by any chance?"

"Free association. But then, you're the master." Dunraven was speaking pointedly, yet Riche ignored it.

"Rosalba," repeated Rumpman. Neither making the connection with Catherine Moorland's sister nor understanding Dunraven at all, he decided upon the path of least resistance. "Can't say I've seen her." Such responses often saved him, such as telling artists "I guess I like this as much as anything else of yours I've seen." Intonation was everything. With a poker face.

Riche nodded thoughtfully. "And the painter, what's his name? Thomas... the one who's painting the mural."

"Mural?" Rumpman was befuddled. "Tom's probably here somewhere, all right. But there's no mural or anything like that. You sure you've got the right..."

Karen appeared. "Two beers. Anything else, Howie? Pretzels? Duck in orange sauce?"

"Why a duck?" said Dunraven, smiling. "If you don't mind my asking."

"Yes, well, no..." Karen felt awkward. Then she acted as if she had just noticed Riche. "Well, hello again."

"This is Ed," said Riche. "You may call him Mr. Ed. So if not duck in orange sauce, then perhaps some oats."

"Actually, we have neither," said Karen, recovering. "How do you do."

"Pleased to make your acquaintance," said Dunraven evenly.

Riche filled the short silence. "I was just asking Howie..."

"Call me Augie," insisted Rumpman.

"Augie. I was just asking about the painter here..."

"Thomas Nygaard, yes."

"That's the one. He showed me the most wonderful painting. Last time I was here. It was in the ball..."

"Yes, yes," interrupted Karen. "He's fine. Working hard. The portrait is almost finished now and..."

"No, not a portrait at all," said Riche. "A mural."

Rumpman pushed his sunglasses up onto his forehead. He looked at Riche. He looked at Karen. He looked back at Riche, then again at Karen. "What's going on?"

"Well, it's not what one would call a..." Karen was trying mightily not to fumble the few words that presented themselves, but Riche addressed Rumpman directly.

"It's... well, great. Haven't you seen it? Wonderful painting. Wraps around the room."

Rumpman removed the sunglasses from his forehead, folded them, and jammed them into his shirt pocket. To Karen he said: "What the hell are we talking about?"

As dusk settled, the glass flames of electric torches spaced artistically and strategically along the marge of the darkening green expanse flickered to life. The volleyball game wound down and people made their way to the water. In the West, towering cumulus clouds went from orange to mauve, then to blue silhouettes.

Nygaard had been painting steadily since morning, stopping only for tuna sandwiches at the noon hour. Ving had finally got that right, and he had not had a creme-filled sandwich cookie for some time. By late afternoon, his eyes were not entirely focusing, and by evening they were spent. He decided to make coffee and then conduct a postmortem in the failing light. He was nearing completion and knew it, but there remained passages which troubled him; a gesture here, a brushstroke there.

All day, not far back in his thoughts, was the image of the *pousse l'amour*, and he had to fight the urge to put it on the wall. In a sense it would have fit well among the flora, jugglers and goat-riding monkeys, but his urge to paint it was too irrational and for that reason alone called for resistance. Nothing that felt so savage could ever coexist with anything else in Artcadia. Besides, red and black bands were too insistent to harmonize with the muted colors of the Catalan Court.

The heat under the kettle caused the water to paradiddle, then flamadiddle, then roll. He reached into the cupboard and pulled down a cup without a design, print, or reproduction -- white inside, ultramarine outside, with a thin gold line around the rim; a judicious-looking cup. He was spooning instant coffee when, in the corner of his eye, he caught motion through the door. What? A figure with a suitcase? He craned his neck.

It was she.

Before he could stop himself, he heard himself say: "Dr. Idos, I presume."

There was a moment's hesitation. Then Rosalva turned and said: "Who?"

The question hung in the air. The tone was surprised, controlled, defensive and offended all at once.

"Elana Idos."

"What about her."

"Isn't it."

Another hesitation. "Isn't it what?"

With the rhythm of scansion, he said: "You are she is you."

Her manner became all patience. "Interesting locution. Right up there with 'a rose is a rose.' Well, golly-gee -- you seem to have assumed something."

Nygaard shrugged in acknowledgement. Rosalva placed her case on a chair and her hands on her hips. It was several long seconds before he said: "I see. My mistake. You just happen to have a manuscript by Elana Idos. A manuscript in progress."

She started. "You bastard. You went through my things."

"So then a rose is a rose is a rose." He crossed the threshold into her space, closing the distance between them. He paced back and forth, staring at her.

Her jawline hardened. "What of it. More to the point is for you to answer what you were doing, going through my things."

He stopped and stood in her face. "I think you wanted me to go through your... things. Wanted someone to discover..."

"Oh, is that it?! Discover? Is that what you call it? Discover what."

"Just how clever you think you are."

"And how clever is that?"

He fought a smile. When he said nothing, her posture relaxed. "Look. I told you I am doing research."

"On the alternates."

"Right."

"Anything else?"

"Their milieu. I told you that."

"Their relation to the establishment, you said."

"The So-Bart, and everything that goes with it."

-- including me... world-class stupid.

"Undercover work. Right?" Disgustedly, he turned toward the ballroom. She did not respond but, strangely, hurried after him. When he threw open the French doors, he turned again to face her.

"This is all one big game for you, isn't it? An elaborate joke. Unless researchers ordinarily sleep with subjects. What is that anyway, field work? The collection of data?"

"You didn't seem to mind." She probed his face, then her voice became contemptuously sing-song. "Oh now, don't let's tell me you got hurt."

"That's not the point."

"Yes, that is the point. Don't try booking me some middle class guilt trip. I'm beyond all that binary, logocentric good-and-evil clap-trap. It just doesn't play."

"Play? *Jeu*? Is that it? How postmodern. And what of Riche?"

"That's something else. Another matter."

"I see. Another compartment. Just another project."

"More than just that. Some people think he's a major writer. Or don't you read. Besides, we go back. I know him, okay? He's a hopeless romantic, and that makes him interesting. Lord, how anyone could sustain that at this point in time! I mean, the guy actually thinks he's going to take me away from all this. Rescue poor little me."

Nygaard decided to meet sarcasm with sarcasm. "And that's such great fun."

"It has entertainment value, yes." She began to laugh, coolly, and covered her mouth.

"Slash and burn. Scorched earth. Who the hell are you?"

She stood stock-still, her back arched.

"Who am I? I'm not some self-deluded bourgeois smearing his precious little ego all over a wall. Did I say little? On a wall that size?" She gestured theatrically with open palm through the door and across the empty space, as if offering an exhibit to a jury. "Just look at it. And then look at yourself."

"And?"

"You're too self-absorbed to notice painting is dead! But as no one in So-Bart seems to know that, you're not alone there. But look at you. You're not even a modernist, much less a postmodernist. You don't have a clue. Who am I? What a dilemma. Shit! What are you? Now there's a question for the age of mechanical reproduction. It's ludicrous. You're in another time zone. Completely irrelevant."

Nygaard stared at her. "So why don't you tell me.. no, everyone... what you really think. You and Elana Idos. Or is it Rose Alisebirac? Whatever name you're hiding behind. Scribble, scribble, scribble. Rosalva Isla de Sila y Caribe... You know, that's really just *too* perfect. Even for a fire-breathing bitch with symmetrical tits."

He turned into the ballroom; she, no longer contained, was hard at his heels -- a rancorous and mimetic voice, bizarrely basso-falsetto:

"Well don't stop now; you're on a roll! Come on; be honest! You loved it! You actually want me to say how easy it was to read the signs of an oral fixation? Heart's desire, baby."

"Oh, I see. Now we're no longer Elana Idos, we're Herr Dr. Freud."

"Fuck you."

Nygaard laughed. "Sounds better than fucking you."

"Oh does it? Let's just see about that."

She pulled at his shirt, drawing him close, and kissed him fiercely; her insistent tongue probing. His surprise was so complete, he found himself returning the kiss, hungrily, as she held his hand to her breast. Then her mouth softened, and her body yielded. Maddingly. Nygaard's head spun. In a crazed par-second, a flash, he remembered something she had said while lying abed: "My therapist claims I'm predictable -- that when others pronate, he can count on me to supinate. I should send him flowers, don't you think? A spring bouquet, once it's autumn."

-- allocation of resources, including one pair of pacifiers... anything to further the cause of bringing up baby or baiting the bull... what is it she wants?

That question made everything suddenly crystalline; the whole exchange, the present exercise. The lady wants to go the distance, to breach all bounds; and, ultimately, wants someone to recognize her pure will; to see that she pulls off -- is pulling off -- any damn thing she chooses right under everyone's noses. The audience. On the one hand, sleight of hand; and on the other, prestidigitation.

He pulled her arms from around his neck. "That other manuscript. That's it, isn't it!" He held her arms to her sides.

"What other manuscript?" Again she tried to kiss him.

"The review of Riche."

She stopped, nonplused, another nerve pinched; but she recovered quickly. "Oh, now that's very good."

"You are Matthew Quintal."

"Even better. You're not just a clueless painter of bourgeois forearms, you're a private dick."

-- bourgeois forearms... now that's sloppy.

"Houhh!" She gasped, suddenly pushing him away and turning violently. They were not alone. There were visitors in the recital room -- Karen, Rumpman, and Riche -- and someone else whom Nygaard did not recognize.

17.

As it happened, there was no end-of-summer gala, no piano recital, and no unveiling of a portrait upon the Moorlands' return from Europe; still, their homecoming was accompanied by considerably more activity than originally anticipated. Moorland himself had said and done little that first day, except to check his sailboat for damage from Rumpman's party. The party itself

had broken up when neighbors, hearing a tumult of voices out on the lawn, called in police who were, as someone later deposed, slow to respond to domestic violence. In fact, they arrived ninety-two minutes later, after the dust settled. Catherine Moorland rued that the unfavorable publicity which followed had, at the very least, spelled her name correctly and linked it with a past nominee for the Nobel Prize in Literature. But this ironic perspective was small consolation; just a space in which to stand and say that the whole experience had not been a complete wash, for she was left in possession of a good parody of late-Victorian portraiture. Moreover, this perspective came later. At the time, her world was caught up in an inexplicably dizzying whirl.

Of course, Riche had departed hurriedly for London. Within a week of his departure, the local newspapers carried a few sketchy details supplied by Reuters. The only certainty seemed to be the arrangement for his funeral. Then came the usual outpourings: a brief biography, synopses of major works, commentary on recent controversies, a passing mention of the nomination, and statements from close friends and colleagues. Really, Catherine would later say, the wire services knew next to nothing.

They did not understand certain connections; for example, why she had expelled Rosalva from the house the day after returning from Italy; that little sister had not gone down quietly but had shrieked like a fallen angel; that, at the height of her white heat, Rosalva had gleefully relayed something overheard at the party; and that was why neighbors once again called police. A causal chain. What little sister said had led to the blowout with Moorland, just as he left for yet another business trip to Hong Kong and Macao. Then came the lawyers. And, yes, unfortunately it was Catherine herself who had placed the advertisement for domestic help, at Moorland's suggestion.

It pained her, once rumors circulated that her sister often wrote under a pen name, that so many were able to deduce how a journalist could have such intimate knowledge of certain details. In any event, they were now incommunicado. A turncoat in the camp, some would say. Or, more politely, a chameleon.

Now the painter was another matter. A nice man on the whole. Bit of a dreamer; but then artists always are. Even Catherine herself had dreams of being an artist -- a piano recitalist; an interpreter. Certainly she disagreed with Irish tax laws which gave sculptors, playwrights, poets and composers a free ride, while actors and musicians had to pay because they were interpreters rather than creators. Still: poets on currency and postage stamps; one had to grant Ireland that much. If only somehow someone could make straight the troubles. Clean up the mess. That's always what is required, and it is others who do it.

The painting in the ballroom was simply too much. Catherine even tried to live with it, especially since her lawyers said it would be entered into evidence. So photographers, for two days. The problem was getting the light right. The mural simply looked too well, and that fact worked against any claim for damages. Getting the light right entailed putting the painting in a bad light, so that its underlying intention looked malicious, like the spray and scrawl of graffiti. By implication, this characterized an on-the-whole Nice Man as a vandal and a Visigoth. This troubled Catherine, for Nygaard had deposed himself well at the deposition. He had explained his motives and defended his aesthetics. Such as they were. To her surprise, and even though some remarks sounded vaguely medieval, she found herself nodding in agreement as she read the transcript. The fact of the mural was an implied compliment -- for she had designed the ballroom, and the artist had never seen such light on such a beautiful wall. Ethereal, he called it, like dawn on the First Day. Inspiring. Of course it was impossible, he deposed, now to paint

anything like a Sistine ceiling; but archetypes were still viable. Well, Catherine had never cared for viability at all, and she found especially disagreeable the overused viable alternative. But still. If only the mural were simply not so overpowering, even with such delightfully muted colors. Catalan court colors, he termed them. Now what are those? Apparently those on the wall. How circular.

For these reasons, and because an artist's pocket is not nearly so deep, Catherine's lawyers decided to make a party of H. Augustus Rumpman on a theory of agency, the classic *respondeat superior*. Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, party for party, they joked. Then they told the one about why attorneys are replacing white rats in the laboratory: 1) they are more plentiful; 2) technicians are not as likely to develop affection for them; 3) there are still some things white rats won't do. Lawyers laughing at themselves. A saving grace, perhaps.

Reams of paper became pleadings and responses, interrogatories and answers, stipulations of fact, motions and orders -- including the metaphysically replicated photocopies of photocopies of photographs of the painting on the wall. Such swift proceedings, expedited by lawyers who, when not advocating for the Plaintiff or the Respondent, bet on and played racquetball and golf. The judge, a personal friend of Moorland but sympathetic to Catherine in this instant cause, also wanted no time wasted. Still, after the initial frenzy, the case bogged down. Perforce, it took a backseat to another, more pressing proceeding -- one requiring a different forum for a different set of allegations and a different battery of attorneys.

This latter proceeding followed from Catherine's need to save face after a convoluted and gossipy article by Yolanda Heine-Watanabe appeared in the mainstream press on the occasion of the Wettin-Willis Collection closing at the museum. The review dissected *Redivivus*, as well as a mural recently completed by the same dauber in the ballroom at the private residence of one of the Trustees. Well, everyone who mattered knew who and where. But Watanabe did not stop there, which would have been tolerable and easily surmountable. She went on to intimate that this particular manor house had servants who were immigrants from Hong Kong via Macao, where their master conducted business. Then came the really offhand coup d'grace: that possibly more than light housekeeping was required of the maids. The context of the remark permitted at least two readings, the first having to do with modelling for the artist. The second was an axe job.

Catherine's lawyers said that the truth was an absolute defense against an action for libel. They had checked out Rosalva's story, the one about the caterer, the one she had shrieked at Catherine the night of her expulsion from the mansion. They had sent a paralegal to *Javier's* to interview the owner's wife. Explained the senior partner, looking up from a yellow legal pad: "Her name's Nute. She's a linguist who speaks five or six languages, including the maids' native Cantonese. While she's making iced tea in the kitchen -- with help, by the way, from an associate of the Respondent in your suit against the gallery -- this Nute overhears the maids squabbling and she says to the associate.. ah, hear it is: 'You'd think they were fighting over a boyfriend. You know, jealous. But who is it? Their employer.'" The counsel then looked apologetically at Catherine and said: "That's what your sister overheard. So we did a little more checking."

Further investigation found that the maids had never been on the Cambodian or any other border; nor had they been in any camp. They had been working as escorts in Hong Kong and Bangkok, until Moorland brought them to his apartment in Singapore, not Macao. Further, they were not three sisters but two, Zhing and Ing; with a cousin, Serena, who has relatives in L.A.

In Re Marriage of Moorland was not at all a bitter contest, even during arbitration for the final equitable distribution of property, however disproportionate. The entire process was clean, efficient, orderly, and right on schedule for closure at the end of ninety days. Never mind the off-centered hole Catherine felt in her being; the yawning light-trap of her husband sitting quietly with his attorneys, distracted, disinterested, disconnected from it all. He had explained himself in terms of convention and cultural diversity. Nature thrived on diversity, not mono-culture; and diversity was a positive value in his own country at this particular time. It was institutionalized, something to be defended, even celebrated. As for himself, he had only adopted certain practices common in most other parts of the world. That was all. He did not care less for Catherine; nor was he Muslim with three other licit wives. He had not shirked his marital responsibilities. He had been a good provider. What he had done was not coerced; not slavery. His view was simply not middle class Protestant, that's all. After all, it was only the Judeo-Christian god that required monogamy. And besides, Eastern thought was rather more interesting.

This, Catherine recognized, must be some manifestation of the *aporia* Rose was forever running on about. The entire proceeding began to appear differently, became transfigured into a theater piece by Ionesco. A ritualistic outworking of a theoretical impasse.

Hearing this argument, the judge at the initial hearing nodded his head in a strange circular motion; a kind of yes-and-no. Catherine tried calmly to collect herself; but she could not escape the queasy feeling that she was simultaneously seated front stage center and at the back of the audience; the harsh knowledge that she was *an other* among others. Moreover, she felt naked and exposed; deeply angered yet even foolish before the tribunal, for being so long married to a man she did not know. Worse, that she may not have known herself.

18.

It weighed on his mind obsessively, after he got the news: the romantic vision of the artist as genius; struggling, misunderstood. The great, tortured soul. And this was not just the popular imagination alone; it was perpetuated in the refined coffee table editions of the art press, those profusely illustrated volumes which rarify "the resolute commitment, the discipline necessary to realize fully the principle of inverse asceticism through a punishing regime of self-abuse." The discipline of tobacco, alcohol, pills, and needles. Perhaps Nute was right about language, for in the late summer of 1987, Basquiat was the favorite poster-enfant terrible. Dutifully answering the call of the inverse vision-quest, he would join the choir eternal the following year. It sounded to Nygaard like an untempered, descending arpeggio. If you ain't dead by 27, then you ain't alive.

James Dean, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Jim Morrison... the world of pop culture was imitating the world of haute culture which, in its turn, was now imitating the world of pop culture. It was like Japanese artists copying the French Impressionists who admired *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji*.

The archetype, of course, was Van Gogh. Or Pollock. Even Rothko. Nygaard, himself, had bought into the image tacitly, when he was a student among other students who were also being indoctrinated. Now he was appalled by its sometimes terrible outworking; the direction it could take. There was his own story, not that he was a shining example; perhaps he had only

been fortunate. And there was this news story about the carrot-top, not that the young man was to be demonized; perhaps he had only been star-crossed. But, more than anything, there was poor Ann.

While she was modelling, Nygaard had told her about a seemingly insignificant event from his childhood -- a visit he had made. His neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Kronenburg, had taken him to Venice. This Californian simulacrum was no longer the water-world dream of its designer. Still, the neatly trimmed frame house of Mrs. Kronenburg's three spinster sisters was on the strand, not far from one of the few remaining canals.

After parking in an alley, they were warmly greeted by Grandpa Traylor, who opened wide the back screen-door. Grandma Traylor was pulling a sheet of peanut butter cookies from the oven. Each cookie had a crisscross impression, depressed with a fork. The old woman lifted them carefully with a spatula, one by one, and arranged them on a wire rack to cool. One cookie cracked, and this was dismaying.

Mrs. Kronenburg waited patiently without speaking, and watched as the cracked cookie was nudged into place. Then she kissed her mother on the cheek.

"Hi Mom," said Mr. Kronenburg, touching her lightly on the shoulder. "Smells good."

"Tommy," said Grandma Traylor. "It's nice to see you after such a long time. My, you've grown. I barely recognize you." She pointed to the cookies and smiled: "You won't be wanting any of these, I know. But if you change your mind, speak up."

Grandpa Traylor sat down at the table. He seldom spoke, but Tommy had always the impression he was a kind man; a stooped, retiring giant, whose massive hands fumbled with the aid behind his left ear. Mr. Kronenburg sat down across from him and began to complain the daily drive to El Segundo, as if this topic were where they had left off the last time they talked.

"How is everyone?" asked Mrs. Kronenburg perfunctorily. Grandma Traylor glanced quickly through the kitchen door out into the next room. Then she whispered something in Mrs. Kronenburg's ear.

"Well where's the medicine?" The intonation was surprisingly sharp.

"Helen..." said Grandma Traylor, somewhat testily. Mrs. Kronenburg waved a hand in the air, as if to say she would say nothing more.

"Well, go on," said Grandma Traylor.

Mrs. Kronenburg looked at Mr. Kronenburg, raised an eyebrow, and went through the arched doorway. "Come with me, Tommy."

Young Thomas liked coming here. The house was enchanted, especially the room in which he now found himself, with its high ceiling and many transparent things. Glassware caught the low light, and everywhere were styrofoam orbs covered in felt, festooned with bright pins and embroidered with beads, depending from the sheerest test line which dissolved toward the ceiling. It was Pat and Rosemary who made these objects; preparations for Christmas, many weeks away. Over on the upright piano, played now and again by Frances, were piled books from the shop where Rosemary had worked many years. Daphne du Maurier. Iris Murdoch. English mysteries.

Rosemary was always painted, sometimes more than others. On this day, her face was powdered white and her mouth was limned precisely in red. She was wrapped in a floral robe and stood with her arms folded. Her deeply-dyed hair; her kind, dark eyes. Had Thomas known then about the gardens on the Yangtze River, he might have said she gave the faint impression of one.

She spoke first: "Mary's fine, I'm sure. How are the boys?"

Mrs. Kronenburg had three sons and a daughter, all much older than Thomas. "George has returned from Acapulco. He's brought back a conga drum. You should see it."

"Hello, Tommy."

"Hi."

There was a moment's silence. Mrs. Kronenburg shrugged in lieu of a question.

"She's in the next room with Frances," said Rosemary to Mrs. Kronenburg. The reference was to Pat, corpulent and preoccupied, the one who left newspaper clippings strewn everywhere; mark-trails from her hunt for a new recipe for pudding, or stuffing for Cornish game hen.

Mrs. Kronenburg motioned for him to sit in the Queen Anne chair and Thomas sank in deeply, his feet dangling above the floor. Rosemary handed him a large book, saying "Here are some pictures you might like."

Fleeting, an abstracted Frances appeared in the bedroom doorway. He could see her subdued red dress, obliquely, through the hallway passage. Pat stoutly supported her arm. Then Mrs. Kronenburg went in and pushed the door closed.

Thomas turned his attention to the book, opening it in the middle. Such bright colors, except for one or two pictures of old boots and rough-looking people seated around a table. Too brown; he did not like *The Potato Eaters*. Other paintings were outdoors and sunny, or indoors and sunny. There were several pictures called simply *Sunflowers*. Those he liked. And some, like *The Starry Night*, were magically strange. And there were paintings of a staring man with his head in bandages. Thomas stared back at this man for a long while.

After a time, Mrs. Kronenburg came out from the bedroom. She looked careworn and serious, like the rough people in the painting, and she sat down heavily on a ladder-back pulled next to Thomas.

"Pretty pictures," she said.

He closed the book. "What's wrong with Frances?"

Mrs. Kronenberg shot a quick glance at Rosemary, who just perceptibly smiled and nodded beatifically. It reminded Thomas of the porcelain figurine of Mary standing serenely in the Kronenburg's flower garden.

"Frances sometimes forgets to take her medicine," she said. "Sometimes she has seizures."

Thomas did not understand, but he instinctively spoke in an undertone when he told her that he did not know the last word. "What's a see-sure," he said.

Rosemary leaned over. In a low whisper, she said: "Sometimes Frances tries to swallow her tongue."

His confusion was complete. "Why does she try to swallow her tongue?"

"You see, dear," said Mrs. Kronenburg reassuringly, "Frances has epilepsy."

"Leprosy," he repeated.

Rosemary smiled gently. "Not quite."

Mrs. Kronenburg continued. "Ep-i-lep-sy. She cannot always control her actions. But medicine helps greatly, when she takes it."

Thomas rolled his tongue far back in his mouth. It just might be possible.

As though changing the subject, Rosemary's longish red nails tapped the book in his lap, and she asked: "Did you enjoy the paintings?"

"Yes. Most. They're nice."

"Well, Tommy, the man who painted those pictures had epilepsy, too."

This bit of arcana made the paintings all the more mysterious. Later, of course, he would be told the legend of the ear. And the following January 6th, when the Kronenburgs gave him a small paintbox on the occasion they called "Little Christmas," the first painting he attempted was a copy of the staring man.

What a charming story, Ann had said. After telling it, Nygaard called it a day. He no longer felt like working, although he did not know -- she did not know -- that a variant version would soon overtake her; a starry nightmare in which she would be caught up inexorably.

No one could have known. Now, reading what happened in the news, with its too weirdly formulaic who, what, where, and when, Nygaard felt disembodied. So he struggled to tell himself the story in reverse, to make sense of it.

The sad sequence began when Ann had befriended a third-year dropout from the Fine Art Department. A photo inset showed a young man slightly older than the German kid who had won Wimbledon over the summer; same color hair, maybe a thinner frame. Quiet and intense; a loner who eked out an existence sweeping floors, cleaning stalls. No friends. Busted for possession; evicted from two apartments. According to a County case worker, he came from an unstable family background. The kid had talent, but his behavior was erratic. A guidance counsellor from the university remarked unresolved conflicts and a low GPA. Textbook stuff.

He had dropped out of school the previous term but still hung around the painting studios. He was noticed at the opening of Uni-Prof's, where it is assumed he had become acquainted with the victim, a graduate student who worked part-time as a bartender. Friends of Ann Vandercleef described her as intelligent and caring -- the sort of person who took in strays. She was kind to everyone, they said. And she had been seen, on more than one occasion, talking casually with the dropout. Sometimes walking on campus; sometimes chatting at a coffee shop. No one thought they were seriously involved, because she was in another league. In this instance, not everyone understood her civility. But then, they allowed, hindsight is 20/20. Ann was a nice person.

It all came to a point shortly after the dropout's alcoholic mother came to stay. Her arrival was unannounced. He was sleeping in a room at a downtown hotel, where he paid by the week. Other lodgers heard them argue, heard their door slam. The kid was gone all day every day, and it was doubtful he stayed in the room at night. No one ever saw the mother. When he was seen, he looked tired and hungry. One witness described him as desperate. Another said he appeared to be on drugs.

Horse tranquilizers, according to the police lab. And cheap vodka. The dropout had a job through the university's extension office, now and again cleaning stalls at a gymkhana. There, a small medicine case was missing. When the library closed at midnight, Ann was walking alone across the campus. She probably never saw her attacker, who must have been hiding in the shrubs around the student center. A ballpeen hammer. Multiple blows to the head. She would pass a week in a coma, then fade away.

Catherine Moorland had also read the newspaper, and she had seen the dropout's hearing on the docket just before her hearing in the suit against Gallery Rumpman. She sat in the back of the court room and listened. According to expert testimony, the young man suffered from acute

bi-polar disorder aggravated by alcoholism and substance abuse. Further, he believed himself to be the reincarnation of Vincent van Gogh.

She was appalled. Who would imagine. There he sat; such a slight figure, manacled from hands to feet. She had watched him trudge shyly in, between two beefy officers; had considered the rhyme between his closely cropped hair and the yellow-orange togs of the county's mental hospital; had peered at his downcast gray-blue eyes.

Later, out of an inexplicable curiosity, Catherine made arrangements through her attorneys to make contact with the public defender's office. The attorneys were able to procure five or six photographs of the young man's paintings and drawings, including a self-portrait. The work was pretty good, she thought. But that stare; it was so compelling.

Absolutely transfixing.

19.

A lazy Sunday morning, and a good day for reading the alternative press back to front, the same way he thumbed through *Time*.

Javier stared at the classifieds. It was not his mother's tongue, so why should he care? The university needed to fill a tenure track assistant studio art professorship with a goal-oriented, diversity-sensitive team-player; an MFA who believes that artistic excellence and true community arise from the recognition and celebration of individuality and difference; one who would interface successfully with representatives of various organizations via innovative integrated multi-faceted out-reach programs that implement the department's progressive vision for the pressingly relevant role of the visual arts within the larger community as we approach the dawn of a new millenium; one abreast of artistic currents and theoretical trends whose own work evidences marked originality of conception and boldness in execution; please send a cover letter addressing the department's particular needs and all relevant experience or a combination of course work and experience; an official application form; a current *curriculum vita*; copies of transcripts for all post-secondary education (official transcripts are required of all finalists); slides of 25 works in various media completed within the past two years (five of which must be drawings); 10 slides of past students' work; a list of exhibitions; photocopies of reviews; and three letters of reference to Human Resources. Members of ethnic minorities are especially encouraged to apply. Salary competitive and commensurate with experience; review process is on-going until position is filled; start date August 15; position availability subject to funding constraints; the university is an Equal Opportunity employer.

Well, he thought, an old ad. How long will it keep running, now that it's September.

Beneath this was a message from a pharmaceutical company, an advertisement announcing the release of a new rapid onset non-depolarizer. And there was a still photograph, Kirk Douglas in a wheat field, from Vincente Minnelli's *Lust For Life*, the one-buck Saturday night classic at the student center. And opposite the op-eds page, a long review by Yolanda Heine-Watanabe.

He scanned the article absentmindedly. Watanabe had been unusually prolific this past week. Like other denizens of the So-Bart, he found her a difficult read. And this one was about a mural somewhere, in some rich couple's home. She did not seem to like it much, but her penchant for hyphenated words and latinate constructions made it difficult at times to understand why not. In one sentence alone, Javier counted 97 words -- and he mused she must be moonlighting over at Human Resources. Somebody had to write that stuff.

He stopped reading when Watanabe quoted Ricoeur, that the whole of mankind was an imaginary museum. A nice phrase, he thought; but as Nute was often saying, language can have little or no connection with reality. And there was a short biography describing the author as a recent grant recipient. Well, he thought, funding can't be all bad; the WPA mural in the old post office was a good one, if one liked that sort of thing.

He gave a last, passing glance to an accompanying photograph and to the caption beneath.

Then, he caught Nygaard's name. His eye moved quickly over the page. Mentioned only once, a seeming afterthought under the photograph, the name was nowhere in the text.

Of course. Wake up. This is all about the mural at Moorland's. One of the alternates had told him the story, but he shrugged it off in favor of hearing about it straight from the horse. Where was Tom? Anyway, he should have recognized Watanabe's animus and ire. You know, he told himself, sometimes you can't see the forest because of the logging.

20.

Nygaard was holed up in his studio. He had returned in the wee hours, clandestinely, and was not answering the phone or the rare rap at the door. Three huge canvases, hinged to form a triptych bent at a right angle, stood in the corner with the best light. A huge expanse of white, a tabula rasa. He should have felt his pulse quickened by possibilities. The expanse should have felt like new heavens and new earth; but he could only sit and stare, unable to decide whether to scrub an *imprimatura*, draw, or begin by painting directly.

Why this crippling uncertainty, this old hobgoblin. *Just do it.* Before the muck swallows the lotus, the distillation of what was learned at the wall. When up against a wall, inspiration will have to look out for itself. Writers and the blank page; painters and the blank canvas. It was hard to get started and, once started, to keep on keeping on; continually to salvage whatever remained and bend it to a new purpose.

-- yeah, right... so what.

The colors he had set out the previous day were still fresh. Serviceable, even. And any bristle round would do. He pushed himself to begin again. Uncertain; directionless and inchoate until the emergence of a form. A face.

Ann.

-- for you... a brush with treason every time... the ideal chair, the woodwright's chair, the painter's rendering of the woodwright's chair... replication... memory and mimesis... old socrates's descending spiral... patient phaedrus... listening politely... to the treason of painting... blah, blah, woof, woof... so be it and amen... world without end if by treasonous painting a prayer for you...

With a housepainter's brush he blocked three Anns serenely sylvan beside a reflecting pool of nymphs, all Anns. But a danger presented itself immediately; the recollection of a photograph of eerily pale, cloned fish -- a washed-out, bloodless reiteration. So more rose in the flesh...

-- rose? worm in the apple...

...and a dove in flight. He could not have explained why. Homing instinct? Nothing quite that simple. But assimilated to his thought were works by Waterhouse, Gauguin, Rousseau, and Matisse, all looking for the same place. All searching for a way home. The farthest reach of will and imagination; beyond the shifting theoretical sands. Arcadia.

Of course, there was Rosalva's recent article, *Against the Wall: A Magic Lantern Show of the Primal Repressed*. He had read her characterizations of the self-deluded cartoonist and the mural as a system of signs in hopeless struggle against the shadow-world of mimetic desire. What a derisive mouthful. In the end.

-- nevermind... let her scribble...

Aware he was drifting, Nygaard struggled to regain focus, to reclaim immediacy; to find the way and draw the map.

-- ann-alogue... not clones but tropes... harmony and communion...

He recaptured a semblance of certitude for an hour, until he replicated (out of spite?) what had been done on the wall: the pigeon on the head of the monkey riding the goat. Then the trope transformed, and certitude gave way to an unwanted, coldly analytical thought:

-- the manippean intruder... satire in an allegory... carnival sweetmeats in a prince's tragical historie...

He stopped painting.

Why the goat? On some level, it seemed to belong. A disruption and a balance. Simultaneously. Why?

He was in a muddle and could make no sense of what moments ago had seemed sensible. He tried to sort it out, to explain it to himself, to assert... something. Rationally. To make a case, however tenuous the connections. Yet that, he knew, was to advance something like a theory; to bow to dry, prevailing winds.

-- can no longer see without a theory of perception... the road to abulia... to a parched arcadia... can't just do, got to ask what you're doing... self-justification... through originality? or a theory? or quoting yourself quoting others... a sense of continuity... or a particular place in time... all at once to be grounded and cut the umbilical cord to the past... so what are you doing... ann? a goat? ann with her love of literature... arcadia, a dove, a goat... mimesis... can't escape... escape what... mimesis... and a goat... didn't escape the goat... can't escape the goat... escape the goat... shit... you're losing it...

Now self-conscious, he began hearing the stream of words in his head; listened intently; repeated some.

-- a dove, a monkey, a goat... mimesis... quoting yourself... can't escape... escape what... mimesis... and a goat... escape goat...

He laughed and let go.

Somehow, suddenly, he understood what he had been about. The muddle began to run clear. The lost grace of graceful Ann. The dove of the spirit. The monkey on the back. The scapegoat. The almost prayerful attitude with which he had begun the painting. It was a long way to go -- a circuitous route -- but he understood the way around; could explain it to himself, if that really mattered at all.

Utterance, quotation, misquotation. All this battling on a canvas stretched on a tension frame that perhaps could not support the strain.

The way home. Or, at least, perhaps the why of things. Standing before the painting, to himself he rehearsed a formal presentation. A witness in his own behalf before the tribunal of his own mind. Had there been a court reporter to write a paraphrase of the rough transcription, it would have read:

Ann had been right: critics and curators; scribes and priests; the never-ending search for the purity of van Gogh. No religion anymore; no anointed one whose sacrificed perfection put paid to the wages of imperfection. Still, even a secular world feels the need of scapegoats for its purification rituals; some profane means to a sacred end. Enter the romantic artist's self-sacrifice to some intensely personal vision. The more abstractly aesthetic, the better; for the sacred thrives on gnostic acrostics. Hence the now quaintly bizarre 19th century hope for literature to replace religion. The central theological problem, of course, is that artists are only human and scapegoats need to be wrongly beset. For this role to have meaning, nothing plays like perfection; and when it comes to perfection, humans have negative capability only. The only thing any artist can do perfectly is the discipline of self-abuse, the inverse asceticism of a self-destructive sacrifice. But ironically, even here in the blue ether, there were standards. It must be played out as a variant of an archetype. It must provide vicarious pleasure, a feeling of the closeted and personal, while still being mass-mediated. And there was one more major catch: for a pop celeb might fumble, might be excused a commercially successful lapse into a mediocre performance of a bad script; but not a painter. A real artist has to keep faith to the sufferingly bitter end.

-- or be consigned to limbo... beatified but not raised to sainthood... the fate of haute celeb warhol... neither justified by faith nor by works... But where faith is held, where slings and

arrows are endured, apotheosis may follow -- if the bitch goddess is well-pleased and accepts the sacrifice.

But even then, we play it again. So either the bitch's appetite is insatiable or the sacrifice is less than efficacious. In either event, there are bullocks to be burned. Artists. Cattle on the hoof, forced through the chute; the archway to le beau monde.

What did any of this have to do with his immediate situation? From a white field of open possibility to the mental muddle of image and iterability; originality; mimesis; the possibility of variant configuration. It was the constant pressure, the treason of resisting prevailing winds. So hard, to pick up a brush.

-- arcadia maintained by a potentiality suppressed... a determination... a choice, then... an act of will...

Last bastion against a monster.

Yet even the most fabulous of creatures is little more than a recombination of known appendages. Market profiles, expert opinion, professional reputation, investment, speculation, brand name recognition. Art as commodity. Moloch materialism. The world of exchange and the world of imagination. A struggle for hearts and minds. Coming and going, either way; whether one bought the mythology or not.

-- a determination, then... a choice... an act of will...

So he painted what he willed. The critics might disparage it, curators ignore it, dealers fail to market it. The public might never know it. And Ann would never see it. It might be irrelevant to everyone but one. Circumstances were what they were, and one did what one did.

Yes, mimesis. A regression. But also a reflection; a space in which to glimpse something. Perhaps something essential. The way home.

He was spent.

He sat down heavily and watched the late light flood the room.

21.

Radiation from Nygaard's portable television glowed eerily in the gathering darkness. He sat across the room from a shelf where it sat as a stop for books. He did not know that, by sheer happenstance, nearly everyone he knew in So-Bart was also watching Norm Norman in his trial run as a special feature reporter on *60 Minutes*. It was anyone's guess whether Norman would stay with his network or cross over to CBS, and the potential move was generating considerable heat in the media. After all, for the past year and a half, Norman had, according to some, taken the low road in the quest for higher Nielsens. Interviews with statesmen and authors had given way to wives who mutilated sleeping husbands. Norman was running neck and neck with

Oprah, Donahue, Geraldo, and their nameless clones. Now here he was, doing a story in the once sacred precincts of CBS News.

-- will the world be the same on the morrow... mr edward r old horse...

Snow. Or an atmospheric phenomenon. He got up to adjust the foil on the rabbit ears, an ancient antenna from Goodwill. Reception cleared just in time for Norm Norman's lead-in. Nice touch: wearing a trench coat and holding the microphone in the left hand. Knitted brow; earnest looking. Hair carefully mussed. Standing on a sidewalk... what, here in the So-Bart?

"...And so, only two months past that story on Sanford Eliot, we find ourselves once again here (looks side to side), in The Triangle."

Norman, however, was mistaken. As the camera followed him to a door Nygaard knew was located "north" of Barton Boulevard, Norman intoned:

"William Larch, too, had artistic ambitions. He had been a student at the Slade School in London; a scholarship recipient. Later, he studied in New York before embarking on a career as a society portrait painter. But somehow, in the go-go Sixties, he had fallen on hard times. Tastes were changing and commissions were few, so he abandoned Manhattan to lose himself in the open spaces of the American West. He turned to landscape for consolation, as others had done before him. Bierstadt, Moran, Diebenkorn. He came here, to the So-Bart. Yet even here, ill fortune would dog his tracks. (Tight close-up.) We'll be back in a moment."

-- no... not a fucking commercial... what about willie?

He had not seen Larch for weeks. He had intended to see him, but...

An actor in a lab coat; a recommendation for dry chow and a selection of flavors; then the muzzle of a shaggy pooch munching contentedly from a bowl at the toes of well-polished shoes.

-- synecdoche... riveting stuff...

Now a dog running toward the camera, with a profusely colored newspaper in his mouth. USA Today, the new national paper, obediently placed in a hand extending from a gold-linked cuff in a gray flannel sleeve. At newsstands everywhere.

Then an NFL quarterback, playing out on the lawn with his big police dog. Surrounded by smiling children and an adoring wife, he speaks of a new life insurance policy. The dog sits at attention.

It was numbing. At that point, Nygaard tuned out, blankly watching the succession of images until registering the news hour's logo of a ticking watch. Then, Norman at the door of Larch's studio.

"This is the national headquarters of the American Canine Genealogical Society. It is also the studio of William Larch. We tried to make contact with Larch, but our telephone calls went unanswered."

The story got curious, more curious, and curiouiser still -- as if a red queen were talking backwards. Norman went on to explain that staff at *60 Minutes* had made application to the American Canine Genealogical Society, requesting information about the lineage of a Yorkshire. Names of fictitious forbears were suggested along with other fragmentary tidbits. Norman held up a piece of paper before the camera.

"This is a certified check in the amount of twenty-five dollars; and for that amount, we received this."

Here Norman held up a certificate, and the camera focused upon gothic and palace fonts surrounding an embossed teal seal. The name of the Yorkshire, "Fluffy," was in prominent italics over two florid signatures, those of the President and the Registrar of the Society.

"Signed, sealed, delivered. To mail drop A083, here, in the So-Bart."

Fast cut to Norman speaking with a lieutenant at the District Attorney's office, a serious young man in a dark suit. Quiet and studious looking, he admitted the case against Larch was proceeding slowly. Yes, he answered Norman, mail fraud is a serious offense; but the case load was heavy and the department was light on staff. Budgetary constraints. An upcoming election year. The recent rash of high-profile cases involving, for some odd reason, artists; including a homicide. Norman's face went sheepish. Nygaard detected his lack of comprehension.

-- hasn't a clue... researchers let him down... or don't want him at cbs...

The attorney smiled pleasantly: "We can't generate enough person-hours to cover all the bases. Sometimes it's difficult to know who's on first, so to speak."

Norman with the Postmaster, the camera framing their exchange against a backdrop of the old WPA mural. The Postmaster stated that everything possible was being done to combat mail fraud; that this was the first such case on his watch. He had been at the branch for almost twenty years; liked the neighborhood and the artists; never got tired of coming to work and seeing "that wonderful painting there." The camera quickly scanned the mural, including the signature in its corner.

Nygaard sat up straight. He had looked at the painting so many times he could not count; but only now did he see what he thought he had seen. W.L. Calligraphic. Larch's hand.

Back to Norman. He looked smug. He spoke about the false signatures on the breeding certificate. Nothing at all could be found out about the President, one Willis Osborn. And as for the Registrar, *60 Minutes* made contact with Yolanda Heine-Watanabe. Her story that she knew nothing of, and had no connection with, the Society was confirmed by a public defender. Larch, the defender said, had admitted that use of the name was entirely serendipitous. There had been no attempt to forge any signature. In fact, it could not be forged. Watanabe, *60 Minutes* learned, was a pen name. As the author desired to remain anonymous, no suit for damages was being

contemplated. The studious young man with the District Attorney's office, when asked if further criminal counts were pending, only shook his head.

All things considered, it appeared that Larch had acted alone.

Cut to stills of a genealogical tree; then to photographs of purported canine forbears; and a miniature portrait of a lap dog belonging to the poet Alexander Pope. According to the Society, this imminent dog is the direct ancestor of *60 Minutes'* well-bred Yorkshire.

Norman moved to the wrap. Larch was now in custody at a minimum security facility for inside traders and other white collar types. Maybe, he philosophized, this time the punishment fit the crime.

"In closing, we would like to show you at home a picture of our Yorkshire. In fact, she does have breeding. The Society was not at all wrong in that. Furthermore, she is a champion in her own right. This summer, she took the blue ribbon for Yorkshires at the State Fair."

He held up a final document. A photograph. As the camera zoomed in slowly, Nygaard squinted, impatient with the slow coming-into-focus.

Well, he thought.

-- a rose is a rose and a horse is a horse, of course, of course... but yorkshire's not always pudding or a terrier...

It was a longish profile, an oversized photo of a big pink pig.

"For *60 Minutes*, this is Norm Norman, in the So-Bart."

22.

The accommodations were entirely salubrious. No complaints. A small but firm mattress, a feather-stuffed pillow, three squares a day, medical care, and a semi-private pissoir. Not to forget the pool and the three-hole golf course that, he allowed, took more determination than he could muster to play eighteen holes. At this stage, energy was for drawing and painting. Yes, he still had the French easel.

Larch sat on the opposite side of the glass partition. He looked rested, alert. He took a long draw on a cigarette secured by the rakish holder Nygaard recalled from their first meeting in the museum. Years ago, it seemed.

"Saw you on television."

Larch smiled. "Wasn't that a hoot? If I'd known about this place earlier, I'd have violated federal law years ago. Wouldn't have wasted time sending stuff to Taos. Light in my cell's

pretty good, so I can paint. Beats wheeling around a sanitorium in a perambulator. But Renoir worked from one, didn't he. If only Gabrielle were here."

He glanced over his shoulder to nod at the guard monitoring their discussion, then said: "Kind of where we started, ain't it."

Nygaard shrugged. "Suppose he could do twenty minutes on Maillol?"

"No art gallery here. Hard to believe, I know... considering the golf course."

"Oh? I can't imagine my surprise."

"Not integral to rehabilitation and reformation of the human spirit. All that rot. Wrong century," said Larch, exhaling slowly. "Got reproductions in the library, if that counts. Utrillo in cheap frames. They're all right. Don't know what Arnold would think of them."

"Ah yes, Arnold... World-class feminist baiter; the guy with no hope for pain on darkling plains."

"Nope. Palmer. The guy with the pitching wedge."

"Think he owns Utrillos? I mean originals, of course."

"Who knows?" Larch sat back in his chair. "There is a guy here. I see him afternoons in the library. Doesn't say a word. Looks like a part-time loser who ran off with the Mom and Pop grocery's cash box. Shesus. Sometimes this place is like a B movie. But you know what he's in for? Fudging paintings. Made a living thirty years."

"Forgery?"

"According to the guard, a specialist in Manet and Morisot. But he must have knocked off some others. You know. Avoid flooding the market. Kind of classes up the joint, huh? "

Nygaard was faintly smiling. "How'd he get caught?"

"He didn't."

"Then what's he doing here?"

"This is the really good part," said Larch, again leaning forward. "He turned himself in."

Nygaard felt confronted with an imponderable. "Why?"

Larch did not answer at once. Pride of craftsmanship could drive one to do it -- the desire for recognition, however grudging; or to have a quiet laugh at anxious authenticators and skittish curators -- to know they knew you knew and they did not; or to batten on a book and movie deal. Maybe all of these; maybe none. "Who knows."

Nygaard ventured a guess: "Pride. Pride in being able to paint as well as the genius."

"But it's not the work of genius, is it. It's not original."

Nygaard shook his head. "It's original if it goes undiscovered. But the really interesting question for me is whether Picasso makes copies of Picasso. If you understand what I mean. An undiscovered forgery raises questions. About inherent quality. The genius is supposed to be in possession of something the forger is not."

"I believe that's an article of faith."

"So maybe art forgery is deconstruction."

Larch waved him off. "I told you; at the Slade, we worried about Cezanne's cubes and cones. Not word games."

Nygaard seized the opportunity to change the subject. "And that's another thing..."

"What is?"

"The Slade. I mean, Norm Norman got that right. But what about you being some kind of society painter. What's that about?"

"Well, it's rubbish and it pissed me off. Talk about license. No other discernable purpose than to make a height for me to fall from."

"So Norman just pulled it out of the air?"

"There's a grain of truth. A subatomic particle. I did a, as in one, portrait for a banker and his family in New York. You know, children in an interior. Sargent, really. Well, it was a disaster, and no question. Jimmy Whistler had it right, all right. Stay away from commissioned portraits, that's my motto. Stay away from commissions altogether. Unless, of course, it involves an obscene amount of cold cash."

"A commissioned portrait is a likeness of someone, with..."

"...with a little something wrong with the mouth.' That's right."

"And the scholarship?"

"Scholarship!? Bull market reportage. Atlas Shrugged stuff. After the portrait, I signed on with the WPA. I'm an old Wobblie, remember?"

"Thought you weren't Communist."

"Anyone with a brain was, back in the thirties. You may recall fascism, or is that before your time."

"Oh please. I'm not the House Committee."

Larch took a draw on the cigarette. "Is there a reason for these questions?"

"The mural."

"At Moorland's? What's that got to do with..."

"No. The Post office."

Larch raised his eyebrows. "Really." He sat back in his chair. Crossing his arms over his chest, he said: "1939. Any questions?"

"No, no questions. Other than what you've been doing the last, oh say, forty-eight years?"

"Easy. Registering Yorkshires."

"Come on. Give."

Larch clasped his hands behind his head, looked up at the ceiling, studied it, then back down at Nygaard. "All right. It was two hundred bucks a month when some folks were pulling down half that. The CCC paid twenty-five a week. I was damn thankful for the program."

Nygaard gathered his thoughts. "It's... what, Bentonesque."

"Benton-esque," he repeated, enunciating clearly. "Where'd you learn to talk like that? Never mind. But let me ask what you would expect from someone working with Benton."

"You and Benton?"

"For a short time. Good painter, but a horse's arse. Had to go. Long story. The thing is, regionalism was in the air. WPA ate it up. I'm told the government's still got warehouses full of the stuff."

"Then you went from painting like Sargent to painting like Benton?"

"Not exactly. There's a couple years in there somewhere, you know. The change did not happen overnight. Hell, at one point Jack the Dripper was with Benton. Try that on."

Nygaard turned the observation over in his mind. "You knew Pollock?"

"No. I'm saying I painted that way because I was finding my way. Not like now. When one appropriates. Eclecticism. Postmodern environment. A strategy instead of a style. Isn't that how they talk now? We learned a craft. Had it or you didn't. We experimented. And me? I was never any good. Thought I told you that."

Nygaard was not listening. "Good lord. I've looked at that thing a hundred times. Then again, how could I know? We only met this past... what? May. Had to be. After Wet Willie opened."

Larch scratched a finger under one eye. "Your point being?"

"Well... how about that. You are W.L."

The old man gestured with his palm up, as if to say voila. "So now you know. Does it make a difference? Who pays attention to a signature, for crissakes. It could have been Wanda Laguna."

"Very funny." Nygaard sized up the old man. In an even tone, he said: "It's good. A fine picture." He chose that last word carefully, not wanting to say work or piece or painting; the old vocabulary seemed more appropriate, somehow even respectful.

"Oh, indeed... Heartfelt appreciation from a brother of the brush?" Larch scoffed playfully. "How satisfying."

"You're entirely welcome."

The guard came over to remind them of the time. "Two minutes."

"Right," said Larch. Then to Nygaard: "Look, there's a key to the studio. It's under the mailbox beside the door. If you have the time, go down and take a look. Something I did before coming here. You'll know when you see. It's yours, if you want it."

Nygaard made the pilgrimage straight away.

The key was taped under the box and, after many seasons, gooey with grime of the sort that hand-soap does not cut; the sort that fastens fingers and collects lint. Perhaps it would stick in the lock, like the copulating dogs he had spooked over a low fence on the walk to the studio. They had startled and jumped. Momentarily hung on the pickets, they scrambled over to stand glued together in a strange twist, tongues wagging, on the other side. Dousal with water for the dogs, he thought. This key, however, might congeal with the tumblers; require pliers for withdrawal.

-- imagine pliers for the dogs... unpleasant though expedited end to the need for the canine genealogical society... but it turns... amazing...

The knob turned and the key came out. Thinking that someone, peering through curtains across the street, probably saw him find the key, he did not replace it. He flipped on a light just inside and entered, pushing the door behind him closed. A new beaded curtain hung between the anteroom and the studio proper. When he turned on more lights, his eyes adjusted slowly. To his surprise, the row of easels and the busboy cart were gone. He looked around. The quotation from Pope was down, as was everything else to do with the Society. The calligraphic Walter T. Foster pensée on the ratio of pigment to thought had been removed. What remained in its stead, in the middle of the dirty wall, was a white rectangular island, underneath which was propped a painting

-- the study Larch had made of *Redivivus*. A piece of paper was affixed to its tacking edge. He reached for it carefully, pulled it free, then turned it toward the light to read a line from Chaucer: *The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne*.

He read it again.

Was it meant to be taken seriously or as a joke. Had the easels still been in a row, perhaps the latter. But all paraphernalia were cleared away; only the study remained.

The obvious occurred to him -- that studies were done by students. Student and teacher; apprentice and master. A compliment, then? What a strange inversion, chronologically. Was the old dauber nodding to the younger painter?

No. Not that. Of course not. The old boy had a full tool box.

Slowly, a realization set in. The copy was resolved to a degree higher than was *Redivivus*, with its now seemingly pathetic length of bourgeois forearm. Admittedly, Ms. Yolanda was right about that much. By contrast, the copy looked finished, and no second-guessing. Of course, he could rationalize that the notion of finish was now passé in a world of cheap, machine-produced products. Craft was hopelessly elitist. With that thought, his perception of the study changed. It began to appear as an anachronistic artifact from an age of certainty in respect of means and ends; a remnant of some long-lost sensibility; a relic. Just maybe. For it appeared also as *a reductio* in reverse; a demonstration that less is not necessarily more. And with that thought, he could not displace the feeling in his bones there was something he lacked. The copy was, he came to admit, on some level a better painting than the original, and with only one-fourth the presence imparted by scale.

Then what of the quotation from Chaucer, if not a joke or a compliment? Perhaps then, a private exhortation. He could not say. Moreover, he knew he would not ask the artist.

It felt like a lesson.

It was his, if he wanted it. He folded the line from Chaucer into his pocket and touched the surface gingerly. The painting was dry enough. He tucked it under an arm, turned out lights and locked the door. He headed home.

23.

In settling out of court, Catherine Moorland allowed that she had been hasty in filing the action against Gallery Rumpman. Besides, she said in arbitration, the divorce proceeding was complication enough. In the end, because Moorland and his world were now objects of scorn, the parodic grand portrait suited her mood. However, that mood entailed driving hard bargains, so she was adamant about a reduced fee. A parody was not, after all, what had been bargained.

In respect of the mural, the gallery and the artist were to take nothing. Rather, the price of the portrait would offset the charge account at Artysaurus, together with attorneys fees and costs of bringing the present action. In short, the portrait was forfeit, and Gallery Rumpman and its agent were released. Free at last, the principal relaxed noticeably and, in an instant really, his upper lip was dry and presentable.

In an attempt at art historical humor once the settlement was reached, Catherine's attorney leaned into her ear and whispered for all to hear: "Had the walls been lined with leather, the artist might have copied peacocks." Rumpman smiled nervously; Karen furrowed her brow.

"Ha-ha and hee-hee," said Nygaard, when he reported the remark. "That from Ruskin's barristers. Barber, Ian & Philistine. Only Whistler prevailed. He won a farthing."

Javier's clouded face brightened suddenly. "Ah! Wheestler. Comprendo. But you know the old curse."

"Yeah. Como su vida something something con abrigados. I don't know."

"That's it. Hey, you want a latte or not?"

"Make it *kabushi-noh*."

"Coming soon." Javier disappeared through the door. Someone inside turned on a radio.

Nygaard sat and studied the towering cumulus clouds. Sunny Sutherland, the So-Bart's peerless talk radio meteorologist, was predicting a glorious Indian summer. No, Native American summer. She was corrected immediately by the shock jock Nygaard could never name. Native American summer, he repeated. Then he invited callers to help find substitutes for any compound using the word "man." Change management to personagement, he suggested, and humanity to hu-person-ity. The calls came in. Manhole cover? How 'bout personhole cover? Mandate would become persondate. Mandible would have to be persondible, which is aurally indistinguishable from personable so it's like we're, ya know, on the brink of Babel or something, whaddaya think, Stabs?

That was it, Stabs Stride, with "Long Liz" the gruesome pneumonic device; Nygaard finally recalled it. You don't really think I think, do you, rejoined Stabs. The caller's chortle got lost in bells and buzzers. The needle (as those in the biz have it) never hit zero. It would have continued indefinitely save for the merciful relief from a minor brownout; a Cage-like silence of half a minute. When the surge of electricity resuscitated Stabs, someone at bedside, inside, had a change of heart and pulled the cord.

Relative quiet. A distant horn; two birds arguing from the skeletal tree wrapped in a steel ribcage on the sidewalk. The mountainous clouds. Nygaard, at last, could hear himself think.

A lack of audacity, that's the problem. Insufficient effrontery. Whistler won a farthing from Ruskin and went bankrupt in the process. Over what? Ruskin's claim that the *Nocturne* was a paint pot flung in the public's face. A source of incomprehension like the Peacock Room was at first, a source of annoyance, though no one painted over it. Why? Because someone understood it would be appreciated in the future? More likely, the imported leather was too rare and costly, there was no way to repair it, and the artist's audacity made the peacocks a subject for discussion over brandy and cigars. But who really knows.

The one certainty is that taste changes. One generation comes, and another passes away. To the one coming, the formerly wild gesture is a given -- just part of the world into which one is born. Acceptance or assimilation involve not so much a paradigm shift as an actuarial table. No one argues the Impressionists anymore, and few are upset with Pollock. Picasso now looks like an old master. One day Basquiat will be quaint, and museum gift shops will be offering replicas of the *Piss Christ*, maybe even with "snowflakes."

Javier brought the cappuccino, set it down carefully, then plopped a folded tabloid on the table next the saucer. "Thought you might be interested," he said. "It's your amiga, Watanabe. I saved it. Qué lastima, chai mai?"

"You're mixing Spanish and Thai again." Nygaard saw the photograph of the wall. It was yellowed and unexpectedly brittle, the paper having been kept too near the sink or the pizza oven. "I've read it. Well, more or less."

"So I'll take it. Maybe Nute uses it to wrap fish."

"No, just a minute. Let me have a look at it."

Javier's hands went to his hips. "You know, you're a flagellista. What's the word?"

"Masochist? Hey, you brought it 'cause you wanted me to look at it."

"No. So you can throw it away. That's why you are a maso-crist. No. Different word."

"Close enough."

"So, you know what I think?" said Javier, thumping an index on the tabloid. "Ideology over imagination. That's what I think."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah."

He turned his attention to the review. It discussed his mural in terms of its relation to the "intellectual climate" in which, like everything else in the mediated natural world, it was best read as a system of signs. There was no discussion of line, color, form, or spatial relations -- anything having to do with esthetics or style. Nor, to his surprise, was there any mention of strategy. The privileged phrase was "justifiable moves" and, given that parameter, the painting was analyzed for its political engagement and found wanting.

The mural, argued the essay, was all sublimation and a supremely wrong-headed typology of a society that existed nowhere at any time. Certainly not in France of the Enlightenment, and least of all in postmodern America. Someone please tell this misguided artist that not even Marc Chagall, were he still alive, would be making fantasias in this place at this time. The 20th century was not a century for utopian visions. Not after Auschwitz. If the mural was in any way radical, it was radically irrelevant.

Or at least that was how Nygaard understood it, and it smart because it approximated his arguments with himself. His deepest doubts and direst misgivings -- here they were, rehearsed publicly; only with a different syntax and a slightly inflated vocabulary.

Yes, slightly inflated. That brought a smile.

Every age has its orthodoxy. The difficulty at this point in time was that the radicals were running the conservatory; their views were now institutionalized and, with that, the old orthodoxy had become the new heterodoxy. Turn about; fair play, some may argue. But for an Anabaptist caught between Catholics and Protestants, the way was treacherous. Always had been, for those not in one camp or another. Burned on both sides.

Not a modernist, nor a postmodernist. Not a classicist, nor a romantic. Neither fish nor fowl. And time was passing. His forty-first was coming. He did the usual calculations: twenty years ago he was twenty, in that same span he would be sixty. Where did it go, *et cetera*. Was it worth it, *et cetera*. He could make a change, before it was too late. *Et cetera*.

No, the facts were these. He was a painter. No cure for it. Had to face the muse and the music. And such a painter as he would be receiving no support from the NEA, the Beard's Fund, the Council on the Arts, or the Department of Cultural Affairs. Nor would Lorenzo il Magnifico be inviting him into the garden. Nor would any corporation be purchasing anything of his for any lobby anywhere.

Did it matter that he was in a culture that was curiously opposed to culture? Art councils and public stations liked to point out that more people attend cultural events, in any given year, than sporting events. If a Butthole Surfers concert or a Stallone movie count as cultural events, that might be true. Otherwise, how were symphony orchestras faring, and what was the audience share for stations in the Petroleum Broadcasting System, the sharper corporate image.

Was the problem with art that it could not be quantified? No artist came with a lifetime earned run average. This could explain the media attention paid prices at auction and the current mania for blockbuster exhibitions and the nose-counting at Van Gogh's retrospective. But how many only went to see what millions of bucks would buy? Once they got there, maybe, Vincent held his own. Still, he overheard one aficionado say: "Two or three in a day? Better believe it. Looks like he knocked off this one in fifteen minutes."

How to assess? He was in the Wettin-Willis, though how they came by his painting and what they paid for it remained mysteries. Beside the point, really; *Redivivus* was no help to any resume. Wet Willie was an unimportant collection, the museum was in a backwater, and neither was interested in his new work. So much for careerism.

Bad review? No one would recall Watanabe's article within ten minutes after they read it, if they read it; and why should they? What egoism. Ah, maybe his fate was to be unappreciated and ignored. Right. What romantic poppycock.

Perhaps the artists' life is its own reward? A life well-spent, then? Of course, on the Galactic Contribution Scale, it was not so much as a blip.

He tried to distract his thought and began turning pages indifferently. Nothing so far from immediacy as old advertisements. Like the notice for *Lust For Life*. The university had replaced the film at the last minute, in consideration of what had happened. As for the announcement of a vacancy in the art department, it was old news and common knowledge. Sandy Eliot had been discharged after an embarrassed janitor found him *in flagrante delicto* among boxes on his office floor. According to rumor, he had the gallantry to cover the student's face and not to divulge her name. Nygaard drained the cappuccino, sediment and all, his thoughts on random sample.

-- good ol' randy sandy... lust for life... lust out or rust out... the lyf so short... too short to produce corporate art anyway...

Ah, the air. It was shaping up to be a memorable Native American summer.

24.

The evening skies were breathtaking. And there was oxygen depletion during a fishkill in the Baltic. John Elway was leading the Broncos through the AFC West; Calvin and Hobbes were finding it difficult to change direction in mid-air; and the Dow Jones Industrial Average plunged some five hundred points in a day, losing a fourth of its value and far surpassing the previous one-day record that signaled the onset of the Great Depression.

According to Javier's socialist newspaper, the villains were companies with computers programmed to respond to market trends, thus leaving human beings to deal with fully automated panic trading.

While the Exchange tried to get up from the littered floor, auctions floated into the golden vault. Still, not every sector of the art industry was flourishing.

Just before Van Gogh's *Irises* sold for 53.9 million dollars, rolling over the 39.5 million paid for *Sunflowers* the previous spring, Nygaard's mural was rolled over with 11.5 gallons of flat interior latex.

In retrospect, he was grateful not to have been whited-out after the record sale. He could explain it to himself no better than it would have been an insult to salt in the wound. The auction houses were playing fast and loose with his sense of absurd theater; they were going head-to-head with salaries in the NFL.

-- quality... valuations... ms alisebirac's floating signifiers...

It was harder and harder to keep any perspective. Van Gogh's paintings had not changed. The flowers were as bad in 1987 as they had been a hundred years earlier. Or just as good. So, something else changed. What Theo could not sell for years was now moving in mere minutes at dizzying prices. Listen, Larch would later say, Cezanne unloaded pictures on his son who used them as fences and walls at playtime. But let a tyke touch one now.

The alternates were incensed and determined. At Javier's, a meeting by word-of-mouth became standing room only and ended after midnight with selection of a committee for organizing an exhibition in protest of the commodification of art. By unanimous vote, it was an invitational show open to everyone. Then a member of the committee suggested that the creaking wooden floors of the old Armory Building could still support installations.

"Sides, maybe we don't hafta pay rent 'cause it's been empty for years, man; like maybe we need just a permit from the city or somethin'."

"Or, failing that, then one of the storefronts south of Danae."

"Nah, keep it in So-Bart. If we don't get the Armory, we'll get like a warehouse."

"Yeah, I know one."

"Harbison's, right? Fuckin' A-prime. Even got skylights."

"Not broken too bad, either."

"Cool."

The alternates pushed to make their deadline. It was Swiss clockwork. Everything fell into place as if the sky had opened and a wing commander from the myriads of rebel angels was lending logistical support. Even the City cooperated by saying no permit was required, someone from maintenance would turn on the lights, the fire marshal might want a look-see, who knows. Tomorrow they'd know if the city attorney thought some kind of waiver was necessary. Oh yeah; be out in a week and don't forget to clean up. Otherwise, the Armory was theirs.

Naturally, the exhibition would come to be called *The Armory Show*. No one could resist the obvious. But they had fun with it. The piece de resistance was a nude mannequin descending a short flight of steps salvaged from a burnout. In two days, artwork crammed the entire space: rolls of stock quotations, shellacked, on vertical panels like Japanese screens; a pile

of electrical cords of various gauge; a collaborative work, "Genuine Sofa-sized Painting," and a self-portrait by Velazquez, submitted by two inmates at the minimum security facility; a tableau featuring toys from cereal boxes, spray-painted a classical-looking white; a big bank of television sets with video loops; a neo-expressionist wall painting in day-glo colors, with a discrete card saying the painting was free but the building would have to be negotiated; galvanized cans stacked in a pyramid; two wading pools filled with styrofoam, plastic, and paper waste from fast-food franchises, smothered in ketchup and linked by a siphon; penis and ink drawings; light sculpture in a small room on the second floor; an installation using soil and rusted machinery; a series of soft sculptures made from hosiery and under garments; a complete collection of Barry Manilow records, cassette tapes, CDs and videos submerged in a plexiglas bath of simple sugar; a huge collage comprised of ads from a single installment of the *Art & Leisure* Sunday supplement. The really radical stuff, authentically Cong, was on the third floor because the committee thought the people should be rewarded for climbing the stairs. Further, the city's director of recreational and cultural affairs had required that a sentinel be stationed at the door to warn that this section may not be suitable for all tax payers.

Oddly enough, at the last minute "Mr. Nygaard" was invited to the show. He explained at length to a committee member, all the while experiencing the keenest sensation of déjà-vu, that he knew his work was inappropriate to a cutting-edge show; that it lacked the right edge. The young man, however, would not take *no* for an answer.

"Hey, they rolled over your mural, man. Just stick a ridiculous price on something," said the amber buzzcut. "That'll give it an edge."

And this was how the triptych of *Ann in Arcadia* came to be listed at \$100,000; the only piece in the entire exhibition that had a price. Everything was meant to be unmarketable for one reason or another.

Of course, it sold. To a petroleum corporation interested in the reproduction rights. The idea was to use the image in an upscale marketing campaign, but this is getting ahead of the story.

"It's a work of genius."

"Bougereau, anyone?"

"Takes courage to paint like that now."

"Reactionary."

"Ooo, neat! Pretty spiffy."

"Why do the women all look the same? It's creepy."

"Wow. Far out. This is great."

"What a fucked-up painting."

"I agree, it's highly allusive, but..."

"Isn't he the same artist who did a ceiling fresco at a millionaire's house?"

"Not a fresco, dear."

"Of course it can't compare with a Velazquez!"

The crowd at the opening was diverse to the tenth power and not mixing well. The recent media coverage about goings-on in the So-Bart had drawn the usual tight clusters of faculty from the university, local artists, preoccupied curators, low-key dealers and bemused collectors; but also a large number of yuppies who enjoyed slumming. The titanium frames that ventured

upstairs to the third floor soon discovered a tribe of frightened alternates. The tribe had sought refuge when, bizarrely, a busload of tourists had mistaken the Armory for some other place. Immediately, the first floor ambiance had changed from chains and safety pins to Nikon cameras and short-sleeved floral prints because, after their rookie guide saw her mistake, the tourists wanted to stretch their legs awhile. The rush to the third floor began when a peroxidized alternate with a box nail through her septum heard the shrill guide call from the bus, "All right, then; we've got twenty minutes!" It was the clipboard coupled with a German accent that stampeded the herd; and, that the first floor had begun to sound like the United Nations in general assembly, but to look like an International House of Pancakes during a blue-head brunch.

If anyone was not disconcerted by the sudden confusion of tongues, it was H. Augustus Rumpman. He was unflappable, disinterested, above the fray. Focused, he stood calmly watching the swarm swirling about him, the calm eye, no longer anxious about making an impression, no longer concerned with giving others his card and remembering their names, no longer impatient with those who called him Howie instead of Augie. These, he so clearly saw, were phenomena merely and matters for concern no longer. The gallery was liquidating, another world dissolved, and he was without anguish.

Not only was he changed within, he had changed without; the blue blazer and grey slacks were gone, the ever-present sunglasses. Now it was chinos and sandals and a shaved head. It felt airy and pleasantly disembodied not to be recognized, although he realized that this aspect of ego would need to be addressed during the next retreat.

He owed it all to Tony. Who would have thought that reading a book could change a life? But *The Zen of Real Estate* was such a book. "If you stop to smell the roses, you'll come away smelling like a rose." Sage advice during the formation and dissolution of temporal illusions like subdivisions and tract housing. The money such illusions generated was now merely an object of meditation; merely a phenomenon to be seen for what it was and used without attachment. It was only another path. Another way to understanding. He had learned from *Dharma of the Deal* that money mattered not at all to an agent and an astral body.

Karen recognized him and waved from across the room. At least they were still speaking, he thought, even with her suddenly out of work. His wife Natalie was another matter, he knew; but she would surely come around once he introduced her to Tony Pro Sri Ram.

"Hey, Rumpa Dhassa. I'm surprised to find you here," said Karen, bussing his cheek.

"Oh, you know. One last look back at everything."

"Sure. Just don't look back in anger."

"Look back in anger, huh?" Rumpman smiled beatifically. "Haven't read that since high school."

"Oh yeah? Who wrote it."

"Ye of little faith. John Osborne."

"A play? You, of all people!"

"Why not? I tried out for a part, but didn't get it," shrugged Rumpman. "That's all."

"Were you devastated?" She poked him in the side.

Gesturing around the room, he said: "Look at this. Who'd miss it?"

"I would." Karen answered with assurance.

Rumpman looked at her intently. "Why?"

"Hard-wired central nervous system. Art and caffeine keep me going. I don't know."

"Pshhh. Who needs it."

"Oh, come on, Howie." She started to sing the show tune: "Ya gotta have 'art..."

He waved her off with both hands. "You gotta have pork chops an' sweet potatoes and a bathroom with hot and cold and maybe a view."

"A bathroom with a view?"

"You know what I mean."

"All right. You win." She surrendered, with hands in the air. "Have you seen Tom? Is he here?"

"Haven't seen him since the settlement."

"Then he doesn't know about the..."

"Not that I know about. Anyway, you can tell him. I'm not sure he wants to see me right now. You know, since I sent the bill. I mean, why should I pay for that?"

"Oh, the house paint." Karen assessed the situation and said, "But that was nice of Sandy, wasn't it."

"Well, you know how he is: 'I just put in a word, that's all'." Rumpman wagged extended fingers to signify quotation marks.

"Yup. That's our Sandy. But I wonder how Tom will take it."

"Bingo. You know how he is, too. Or can be."

Karen turned away, to look across the room. "So what do you think of the painting?"

Rumpman nodded.

Without seeing everything, Karen made excuses and departed the exhibition. She jumped into her red BMW for the jaunt to *Javier's*, all the while glancing at the mirror to read the white on red For Sale sign in the rear window. Tomorrow and tomorrow, she thought, it will bother me less and less. When she could not find Nygaard at the cafe, she decided that she did not want to climb the stair to his studio.

Driving slowly, she returned to her apartment. She day-dreamed through a red light; then awoke with a jolt to expletives and honking horns. She even missed a turn and so was forced off the beaten path by an unlucky combination of construction barricades and one-ways. When was the city going to finish that damned... but she eventually found her way home. She entered the alley, parked in the back, and walked around to the front.

He was sitting on the concrete planter by the double doors. He explained that he did not want to be at the Armory. Just not in the mood. So, he thought, maybe she might like to talk. Or something.

"*Javier's* maybe?" He stood, readying to leave should the offer be declined.

"Just came from there."

"Okay." He started to go.

Karen stayed his arm. "There's still or something to consider, remember?"

"All right. Or something, then. I'm open."

"Really." She touched him under the chin, tentatively, gently. "Sorry I don't have sherry."

He nodded. "Okay. I deserve that."

She nodded slowly in return. "How long you been here?"

He looked away. "Not long. Two or three hours."

She smiled, then hooked a finger under his belt. He fidgeted.

But then he relaxed. It was all warmth and good humor, nothing brazen or solicitous; not even when she said: "Like to see my etchings?"

-- amazing delivery... the no come-on... except it's not... or now what...

It sounded like she meant it, and that was confusing. As soon as he responded, he knew it was a botch: "It won't work."

"Oh." She withdrew the finger and stood slightly back, her face turned for a three-quarter portrait under the porch-light; all hollows and high cheeks, a highlight on moist lips.

"Then again," she continued, "it may be a reasonable facsimile of something good."

"Or a really bad copy." Again he fumbled; could not leave it alone. Horror vacui.

What a dork, she thought; men and metaphors. She looked at him patiently, then quietly said: "That's right. Human condition. So why don't you come up."

Soon, they were otherwise fine. The only real problem was money, that old bugaboo and destroyer of connubial bliss. Karen did not complain, but Nygaard had trouble eating and sleeping -- even painting -- because he had more money than he had ever thought to see. The oil company had bought his entire production for the past year, and its officers wanted their portraits painted. He declined that commission, but his originals were hanging at headquarters in Atlanta and Tokyo, while reproductions were distributed worldwide, to clients in their thousands, as wall and desk calendars.

So, he couldn't eat, sleep, or paint. Poor Karen, having to listen to his complaints and second-guessing. It would always begin with high talk about the proliferation of images. But then came the straight skinny. He had become an anomaly: an artist with means.

Well, wasn't Picasso an artist with means? *And* a Communist? She asked him this over and again: "Listen, Tom. Just because your work is appreciated -- all right, selling -- does that, of itself, really signify it is no good?"

Nygaard could not answer. Why, because the answer sounded so very, very lame in his own ear. He could neither admit it, nor shake it. And what was it? Only that he felt condemned, doomed, buried alive by history. Oh, agony!

After all, with the exception of one to Theo, Vincent never sold a picture...

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James Gardner